



A THEATRE FOR ALL

Sitrarangam—the small theatre Madras

by Ludwig Pesch

with a Foreword by Himanshu Burte

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Dedicated to the memory of Prof K.S. Haridasa Bhat
(1924–2000) who knew about the power of ideas and
enabled thousands to lead fulfilled lives

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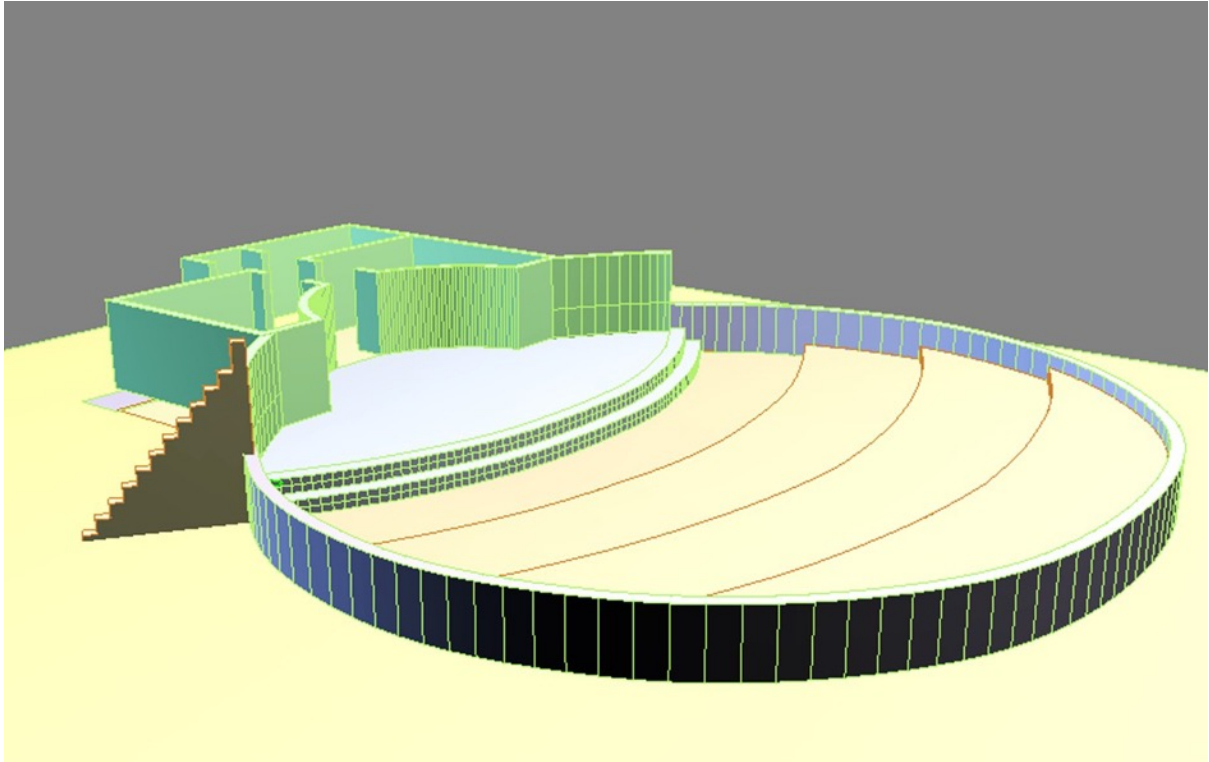
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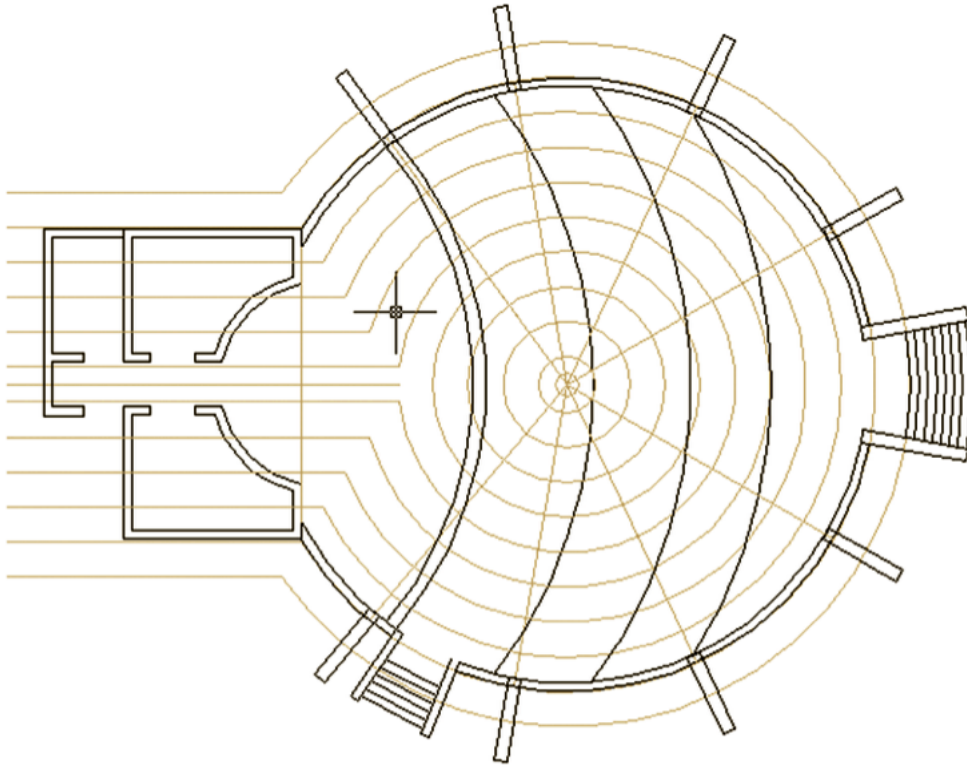
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Groundplan A: 3D rendition



Double-click on the image to enlarge it
Image © *Digiscene* Amsterdam

Groundplan B: top view



Double-click on the image to enlarge it
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Foreword by Himanshu Burté

The word 'theatre' summons up visions of a large building with a porch set back from the street, fronted by a neat but faded garden lying smug in its geometrical order. Smugness, and faded grandeur, are in fact qualities one associates as much with theatre buildings themselves, as with their gardens. The average theatre, like the average public garden in India, is a place that, while dedicated in its lost concept to the pleasures of the senses and the imagination, generally succeeds in putting life within it to sleep. If, then, theatre, dance and music are alive at all in India, it is definitely in spite of the theatres they get to work with.

When I first saw Sittrarangam a couple of years ago, it was being used as a makeshift warehouse by the local leisure industry. The small auditorium was filled with what looked like small go-karts, rides on which could be had outside for a fixed price. In spite of this it looked every bit a good idea that was being encouraged to fade away. Sittrarangam is small, circular, built with local materials and skills (exposed brick piers, an angled wooden screen on the sides, and a thatched roof comprise the constructional palette) and was inexpensive to build and maintain. More importantly (and I was to find ample testimony for this later), it is the rare auditorium that in the process of being built, never lost sight of its animating purpose—the nurturance of an engagement with the performance it shelters.

The fact that it took a performance artist to direct the conception, design and construction of a performance-friendly space may appear perfectly natural at first sight. Equally, given the perceived perishability of its materials, Sittrarangam's physical decline too could be considered not worthy of comment. Both views, however, miss the less perishable critique of the culture of providing performance spaces in India, that Sittrarangam embodies.

The first view forgives the status quo where professional culture managers and architects continue to conjure up performance spaces for music, dance and drama, that trying to accommodate all types of performance, end up nurturing none. The common inability of our theatres to enhance the experience of performance suggests that the design of auditoriums, rather than being focused on facilitating a rapport between performer and audience, has remained tangled in technical and economic considerations. The pity is, even so too many theatres underachieve even along these relatively simple dimensions. Theatres continue to be badly serviced, and are too expensive to build in numbers large enough to satisfy the needs of performance artists.

Being built for less than the cost of a small 'pucca' house, Sittrarangam gives the lie to the common plea of the resource crunch as a justification for the lack of cultural facilities. Its artistic success (and indeed, the subsequent withdrawal of official support) suggests that there is something very wrong with the preferred model of 'ideal' spaces for the arts that views the performance facility as a vehicle for the expression of institutional prestige. Only this can explain how the equation of size, cost, and date of technology with 'quality' continues unexamined by most architects and others concerned with the creation of spaces for the arts. Sittrarangam, on the other hand, suggests that not only is small experientially beautiful for performance, it is a more dependable norm if architecture is to be supportive of performance. That such a norm is also likely to be friendly to extant Indian performance traditions only adds strength to the argument.

Given the relatively low cost of its maintenance, and the perpetual shortage of performance spaces, the continuing neglect of Sittrarangam is understandable only in terms of the argument about prestige. Sittrarangam makes no grand statement on anyone's behalf. While that may be considered a rare virtue by some (including this writer), it also fails to enthuse the 'powerful' to act accountably for a change, and resurrect a much needed facility. The price of its artistic success as well as its overall righthheadedness, then, is the threat of a failure to survive in the real world.

Lest this conclusion be used to nourish a complacent argument about the need to play the game of survival, it is important to note that if Sittrarangam goes the way of all flesh and thatch, the failure will not be of those who made it happen, but of those who allowed it to fade away. Meanwhile, irrespective of its physical fate, we have this little book about a little theatre to thank for keeping the argument alive.

Himanshu Burte

Mumbai, January 16, 2002

1 Introduction

What we seek today is not a repetition of the old pattern, be it Indian or colonial, but a positive contribution to strengthening the quality of current life

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay¹

Fifteen years have passed since a performance space, aptly called The Small Theatre Madras in English and Sittrarangam in Tamil, was built by traditional craftsmen in Chennai.² It was used by hundreds of artists, teachers and many cultural organisations, on a daily basis for about two years after it was built.

The question arises whether it was merely its 'cuteness' and 'rustic simplicity' that made this theatre endearing to Indian and international visitors alike. Those who experienced the beauty that unfolded in, through and around it, all seem to share fond and vivid memories of Sittrarangam.³

This monograph has been re-written in response to a stream of requests for information about Sittrarangam and pictures. Some requests come from art lovers and performers who enjoyed the performances and educational events arranged in Sittrarangam for their benefit. I have also been approached by several students of architecture who learnt about Sittrarangam long after it ceased to serve its original purpose. As my initial ideas and concepts are still of interest to all of them, this revised and enlarged edition of the original monograph has been prepared for their sake. The chief objective of this publication is, however, to encourage innovative theatre designers to translate the 'Sittrarangam experience' into original solutions of their own.

Some people in Chennai would like to see Sittrarangam restored to its original beauty and revived as a cultural centre accessible to all artists and art lovers; other readers may want to design and build similar theatres elsewhere in India and other countries, for instance in South Africa from where a request for assistance reached me via the Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany. This widespread interest was what I had hoped for when I presented my original project proposal. In 1983 I had suggested that it was worth looking at various indigenous building styles, materials and construction methods for the benefit of all cultured communities in need of suitable and affordable performances venues.⁴

Looking at the working conditions and aspirations of traditional performers, I had become convinced that it was possible to design and build a theatre not just for, but also with them wherever a performance space is needed. My approach was appreciated because it was based on a realistic assessment of many factors and circumstances that determine the

¹ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *India's Craft Tradition*, Preface.

² Since *Sittrarangam* was built in 1987, the capital of Tamil Nadu, then still called 'Madras' (i.e. a name carrying strong colonial connotations), has adopted its preferred Tamil name 'Chennai' as its official name; this means that 'Chennai' is now being used in all English documents, publications, and signboards.

³ See also Appendix 5, 'Personal comments (Visitors' Book 1987, 1988)'.

⁴ See also Appendix 1, 'A theatre according to the Natya Shastra in the IIT Madras'; and Appendix 3, 'In search of an Indian theatre'.

experience and success of Indian performing arts to a large extent.⁵ Going by the feedback received from local artists and visitors this low-cost theatre can be said to have achieved its original purpose, namely to facilitate artistic experience, in ample measure.

Similar theatre projects can, without any doubt, be envisaged and implemented almost anywhere, under a variety of circumstances, and with equal confidence, by individuals and institutions alike.⁶

For all those engaged in planning a new theatre, the 'good news' is that a theatre reflecting their actual needs and expressing their very own vision of what art is all about need not be a costly proposition. This entails, however, that preconceived notions of what a 'proper theatre' looks like can be dispensed with. Such notions rarely, if ever, seem to serve any constructive purpose at all. The project described in the following pages along with its context will therefore not conform to the "preferred model of 'ideal' spaces for the arts", as Himanshu Burte has already observed in his Foreword. Sittrarangam should properly be classified as 'experimental performance space' rather than 'building' or 'institution', although this is what comes to the minds of those who have been there. It represents a collective effort to create a congenial theatre space for a given place, cultural environment and moment in time.

Several hundred performances and music concerts were presented during the first two years when Sittrarangam was actively promoted as a cultural meeting ground by the Tourist Department of the Tamil Nadu Government (Plate 7). In addition, several local and foreign cultural centres used it for artistic workshops arranged for the benefit of children and adults alike on account of its roominess and friendly atmosphere (Plate 15). For several more years, Sittrarangam served as the main rehearsal space for a drama troupe whose members enjoyed of the venue's flexibility.

In recent years it has mainly been used as a storage space by the authorities in charge of it. While it has not been accessible to the artistic community and its public for some time, its frivolous come-back consists of a new role as background for the 'romantic scenes' in some Tamil movies. Yet within a few days, Sittrarangam could easily be restored to its pristine condition by repairing its roof and, at the most, replacing a few quite inexpensive fittings.⁷ The amazing workmanship, speed and teamwork displayed by the people needed for such an overhaul can be witnessed in Chennai on a daily basis. These skilled workers find temporary employment on countless building sites, before and after temple festivals and weddings, and wherever a political parties organize meetings for which even the largest city auditoriums are too small.

⁵ This approach is, of course, not limited to India but desirable anywhere in the world; after all, it is a fundamental question of courtesy and respect for performing artists that theatres are planned in such a manner that their needs are taken into consideration from the outset.

⁶ See also Appendix 4, 'Project description March 1986'.

⁷ The dilapidated of its roof has not disqualified *Sittrarangam* from being listed among the city's major touristic attraction, for instance on the Chennai travel agents website 123southindia.com: "Sittrarangam: This folk art theatre is situated in the Trade Fare Complex on Island Grounds. Indian folk plays and classical art performances are staged here."

Some initial considerations

Two principal considerations determined the appearance of Sitrarangam. Firstly, the layout of Sitrarangam was reduced to the most basic design, a mere aid to artistic performance and its enjoyment where no superfluous detail would be allowed to distract artists and their audience during a performance. Secondly, it was decided to dispense with all permanent decorative elements seen in some other Indian theatres and to provide two vacant spaces for temporary arrangements instead (Plates 3, 10 & 14). This approach ensured that the project would be inexpensive and easy to realize in a surprisingly short period of time.

Permanent decorations were replaced by customary flower arrangements, elaborate floor drawings (kôlam), oil lamps (Plates 2 & 12), and the placement of any sacred or precious image belonging to the main performer (Plate 14). Such flexible arrangements created an auspicious atmosphere and also made the theatre a hub of creative co-operation. Many visitors made a small personal contribution by way of arranging flower garlands or drawing a kôlam. Being part of a spontaneous and collective activity was a memorable experience for many visitors because there is now a lack of audience participation during most artistic events. Modern city dwellers all too rarely find the time to express themselves in such a leisurely manner in their daily lives, something common just about a generation ago. A congenial atmosphere was therefore created during each event held at Sitrarangam without imposing any of the formal conventions encountered in any other 'modern' theatre or multi-purpose auditorium.

Audience rapport and community participation

It was the personal involvement of so many different types of people, both young and old, that brought Sitrarangam alive. Given yet another chance, the magic of Sitrarangam would certainly work again wherever the performing arts are being studied and practiced. Artistic experience and personal involvement can easily be harnessed and thus contribute to a thriving and cultured community of responsible citizens.

The implementation of such ideas, fervently invoked by generations of Indian freedom fighters, including several prominent poets and musicians, cannot be imposed by remote and anonymous agencies; it requires a local forum that solicits participation and communication wherever people live, study or enjoy congregating.

Every generation and every neighbourhood or village is certainly entitled to create, maintain or modify the type of venue that suits its current cultural activities and social conditions; merely being saddled with the maintenance of 'historical' theatre architecture, on the other hand, is by no means helpful if a flourishing artistic atmosphere is the aim. Already for this simple reason, a low-cost approach to theatre architecture is preferable to the construction of monumental buildings that tend to be too big to be filled by local audiences on a regular basis, and have also proven to be so expensive to maintain that all too little money remains to support the very artistic community any theatre is meant to serve.

With a few notable exceptions, 'customized' or 'localized' (hence affordable) architectural solutions were precisely what the ancestors of today's patrons of the performing arts had also opted for. This hypothesis is based on three factors: firstly, it is informed by references found in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit texts; secondly by archaeological evidence (or rather the

absence of much archaeological evidence for monumental theatre architecture);⁸ and thirdly by the fact that there is still ample evidence in the form of living performing traditions all over the country whose exponents can make themselves at home in virtually any makeshift theatre; they can work even in places where more suitable infrastructure is lacking—not because of any absence of a local ‘theatre’ or ‘auditorium’ (there are plenty of them almost everywhere), but because nobody ever seems to enquire about their humble needs that should be looked after in order to perform to the best of their capacity!

The opportunity to perform quite frequently, or even regularly, before small but discerning and loyal audiences serves most artists’ long-term interests far better than the odd performance before an anonymous and undiscerning crowd. After all, a performance for ‘the masses’ rarely amounts to anything more than a public relations stunt and generally lacks any ‘added value’ by way of a shared cultural and aesthetic experience worth remembering long after the event itself.

Co-operation among people from different backgrounds or classes, trust and goodwill tend to be far less difficult to achieve than it may appear initially. The ‘Sittrarangam experience’ has proved in ample measure that such scope for co-operation constitutes a valuable opportunity not only in an idealistic sense but equally so in terms of viability. Without sound foundations in economical terms, professional artistic pursuit cannot endure even in India, neither in the context of royal or temple patronage (as in the past), nor in India’s modern, democratic, cosmopolitan and highly urbanized society. Such opportunities could and should therefore be seized more often and pursued in a methodical manner.

A more assertive approach on such lines is bound to benefit artists, educationists and organizers of cultural events alike. It will also help to foster international relations as visiting artists are more than willing to reciprocate by way of making their own facilities available to their Indian counterparts once a fruitful working relationship has been established. Yet to seize such opportunities, some imagination must be applied to any artistic project, and this on a regular if not daily basis rather than just once in while. Wherever this goal can be achieved, the performing arts will play a greater role without becoming subservient to any ulterior purposes. Besides mutual trust, this approach also instills self-confidence among the younger members of society irrespective of their background, and India’s vast literature is not lacking in evidence for such ideas being put into practice already several centuries ago. In this sense, Sittrarangam did indeed become a Theatre for All throughout its working life if not beyond.

The benefits of ‘minimal theatre architecture’

Sittrarangam has demonstrated that ‘minimal theatre architecture’ can inspire because it effaces itself from the very moment when a performance has caught the imagination of the audience. It also inspires performers to give their very best in the presence of an attentive assembly of art lovers (rasika). Dr Kapila Vatsyayan has characterized this vital artist-audience rapport in the Indian context as follows:

“The Sanskrit word for the reader or spectator is rasika: he is a potential artist (sahridaya) himself. The bridge of communication was established when the familiar was revealed

⁸ See also chapter 4, ‘Historical and social aspects of Indian performing arts’.

through a known language of symbols. The artist exercised freedom of creation, the freedom in a given frame of reference, of beliefs, of philosophical principles and aesthetic theories.”⁹

This extraordinary degree and quality of artistic involvement found in India is the very reason why some performances are remembered for life. It is an established fact that such memories go beyond mere nostalgia, be it by the artists themselves or by discerning members of their audience. Yet in the absence of a close artist-audience rapport, there can be no continuity in the performing arts: the quality of this rapport also determines the status and respect enjoyed by artists in their respective society and hence whether they can live and work in dignity or not. According to Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, nothing should be allowed to undermine the active participation of an audience:

“Today, it is the frame of reference which is challenged and endangered through the impact not only of the West but of modern technology. This makes creation impossible in the traditional sense. Also, the participating audience so necessary for this communication is languishing. This is a question which must seriously concern us.”

The sublime experience of a live performance in a chamber setting is indeed rare and often inaccessible to outsiders. It can be said that, even if the performers are of the highest calibre, the public generally faces a barrage of distorted and hyper-amplified sounds rather than a truly musical experience. With regards to Indian music, this is indeed an extremely deplorable development—it means that one of the great musics of the world is rarely presented in a satisfactory manner within India. This state of affairs has in fact become so ‘normal’ that most Indian listeners seem to be oblivious to the fact that microphones did not exist yet when the greatest exponent of this arts performed and composed the very music we still enjoy today.

As the critics of leading newspapers and magazines have reiterated time and again, one experiences this soulful music mostly in a highly distorted form during music festivals and public concerts.¹⁰ N.M. Narayanan, the chief music critic of *The Hindu*, once wrote about the impact of the concert series which I had initiated as an alternative to the public concerts polluted by high decibel levels and bad amplification:

“Max Mueller Bhavan’s ‘Sampradaya’ is, perhaps, the only cultural centre in Madras which promotes mikeless Carnatic classical music. It has done so with considerable success too because it has campaigned well for the serious setting in presentation of classical music and drawn a keen and sophisticated listening circle to it. A visit to ‘Sampradaya’ is never wasteful because its concerts have very often been an education on how classical music should be responsibly performed and on the rapt listening that should be given to it.” *The Hindu*,⁷ March 1986¹¹

⁹ Kapila Malik Vatsyayan, ‘Aesthetic theories underlying Asian performing arts’, p. 27.

¹⁰ The *Tata Theatre* of the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA, Mumbai) is the sole large auditorium that constitutes an exception to this ‘rule’; here Indian music is regularly being enjoyed without amplification by up to 1010 listeners.

¹¹ *Sampradaya*, a research centre for the music traditions of South India, was co-founded by the present author and has attracted musicians, scholars, critics and a devoted group of connoisseurs. It began with chamber concerts held at the library of the German cultural institute (Max Mueller Bhavan Chennai). For performers and scholars, participation in *Sampradaya*’s ‘mikeless’ concert series as well as documentary recordings and workshops soon became (and continue to be) a matter of great prestige.

Why should the experience of a ‘mikeless’ performance, the absence of amplification, be conducive to ‘rapt listening’ even though Indian musicians tend to claim that the subtleties of their respective art—the continual modulation of sounds produced by a voice, string or drum in order to express a variety of moods and feelings—can be conveyed best when transmitted via a loudspeaker? The answer lies probably in the fact that amplification encourages the public to withdraw into the anonymity of a gathering. Under such conditions, private conversations are no longer noticeable during a performance as amplification drowns all other sounds. The problem experienced by any Indian musician or dancer cannot be expressed better than in the following summary by Jan Mrázek with regard to the dilemma faced by a puppeteer of Java: that of having to attract a large audience on the one hand while being unable to hold its attention on the other:

“I have mentioned the significance of microphones and amplification. They too affect the atmosphere and the way people watch wayang. According to Pak Naryo, in the past when the dhalang’s voice was not amplified, members of the audience listened more carefully, and when they talked, they kept their voices down, while now, with the strong amplification, people do not have to concentrate to hear the sounds of wayang and so tend to be less attentive and to speak loudly. It would be misleading to say that in the past people were listening only to the dhalang, but somehow, amplification changes people’s relation to the sounds of the performance and the general soundscape. People hear the performance more easily but listen to it less; they do not have to listen to it in order to hear it, or so Park Naryo’s comment would suggest. This too is a characteristic of the atmosphere of the large-scale wayang performances and the fragmentation of people’s attention. The phenomenon can be compared to the way that strong electrical lights illuminating a stage filled with guest stars change the atmosphere and make the single, focal lamp illuminating the screen and the puppets less central.”¹²

While researching Indian music and designing Sittrarangam, it became increasingly obvious to me that the problems caused by technological intervention in the arts cannot be resolved by technical means alone. In the struggle to obtain mass appeal, the essence of a ‘classical’ art is lost. This has to do with the fact that most theatres operate on an all too intimidating or impersonal scale. Working exclusively under such conditions, it will become harder to even find young talent willing to master an art if it can neither be developed in accordance with its own nature nor attracts sufficient media patronage. Patronage extended by the mass media is subject to constant change; a ‘classical’ performing art, on the other hand, requires that its exponents focus on long term goals and ideals that cannot be attained without a good measure of resilience and stubbornness.

¹² Jan Mrázek, ‘Javanese Wayang Kulit in the Times of Comedy’, *Indonesia* 69, p. 113.

2 A small theatre for Chennai

Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and beautiful.

E. F. Schumacher ¹³

Sittrarangam is the Tamil equivalent to the English words 'small theatre' (siru + arangam = sittrarangam). The Small Theatre, as it is also known, was inaugurated on 8 September 1987. It is located in central Chennai, at the Island Ground Indira Gandhi Children's Park near the University of Madras. The other landmarks within walking distance are: Marina Beach, the most popular recreational area of the city; and Fort St. George, the oldest colonial monument inside a vast compound that also houses the Secretariat (Tamil Nadu Government). Within twelve months of its inauguration Sittrarangam hosted nearly three hundred programmes, and nearly as many the following year, besides serving the purpose of a regular rehearsal and workshop space for local drama groups and visiting artists. The Small Theatre was designed for TTDC (the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation, Govt. of Tamil Nadu) in conjunction with INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage). After five years of research in different parts of South India, I was convinced that, given a fair chance and being presented in a more appealing manner, all the traditional performing art forms I was privileged to witness, not just the 'prestigious' or 'popular' ones, could flourish in spite of the proliferation of satellite television and video games. My conviction was shared by a number of renowned personalities I knew in the field of Indian culture; but it was yet to be tested under metropolitan conditions like those of Chennai. Many others believed that many art forms would not survive the onslaught of modernization.

Small is beautiful

In his most famous book, *Small is beautiful*, E. F. Schumacher sought to awaken us to several problems no responsible citizen can evade with a clean conscience in view of the irrevocable depletion of natural resources that really belong to all mankind:

"To talk about the future is useful only if it leads to action now ... with new methods of production and new patterns of consumption: a lifestyle designed for permanence." ¹⁴

It follows that growth must not be our primary concern nor be allowed to become an obsession; and something big or monumental is not necessarily also beautiful:

"Scientific or technological 'solutions' which poison the environment or degrade the social structure and man himself are of no benefit, no matter how brilliantly conceived or how great their superficial attraction. Ever bigger machines, entailing ever bigger concentrations of economic power and exerting ever greater violence against the environment, do not represent progress: they are a denial of wisdom. Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and beautiful. Peace, as has often been said, is indivisible—how then could peace be built on a

¹³ E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, p. 32.

¹⁴ *Small Is Beautiful*, p. 19.

foundation of reckless science and violent technology? We must look for a revolution in technology to give us inventions and machines which reverse the destructive trends now threatening us all.”¹⁵

Similar questions were already raised by Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), a philosopher who was greatly admired by Mahatma Gandhi on account of his principled quest for establishing universal human equality and dignity. Thoreau’s *Walden*, a most delightful account of his two-year retreat in the woods, established his enduring reputation for being the first Western intellectual who raised the question of ecological propriety, an issue which has become even more burning for all of us than he could possibly have foreseen.¹⁶

Schumacher insists that humane working conditions and ‘intermediate technology’ should become central issues, not just in theory but also in practice. He believes that living in accordance with spiritual values—traditional or contemporary—enables people to harness their individual talents for their own benefit and that of the communities they live in.

Although Schumacher primarily refers to economic activity, the same can safely be said of artistic production as a closer look at India’s rich and complex ‘folk arts’ will confirm time and again. This presupposes, of course, that these arts remain in the public domain rather than being reduced to official circuses and abridged tourist attractions of doubtful merit.

Thus *Small Is Beautiful* was a most appropriate motto by which the team would be guided in this intercultural effort: architect Shahriar Dehghan, INTACH’s (then) cultural co-ordinator Ms. V R Devika, and myself, initiator and co-designer.

Word of mouth, nation-wide newspaper coverage, and a feature in *Inside Outside: The Indian Design Magazine*¹⁷ made a small theatre for about two hundred spectators a celebrity in its own right shortly after its inauguration. It was built for a small amount of money, namely Rs 150,000 (rupees one lakh and fifty thousand only). This was approximately equal to the total cost of three newspaper advertisements placed by the Government of Tamil Nadu in the leading dailies of the state to announce the inaugural function for Sittrarangam.

If such a small monetary investment for a performance venue could achieve so much, there must be something more to it than meets the eye. I was overjoyed to realize that it was indeed the elementary, rustic building methods applied by the people who built Sittrarangam with their own hands, without the use of any machines, that conquered the hearts of the urban elite of India. Expressing the sentiments of many discerning art lovers, including the international community, who regularly flocked to Sittrarangam, music critic N. M. Narayanan wrote after his first visit:

“The venue is the winner.

Just the experience of a single evening at Sittrarangam sufficed to prove that the venue can be the winner irrespective of the quality of the performance. This small theatre has been conceived to re-live tradition in a setting which belongs to it. It is beautiful. It is beautiful

¹⁵ *Small Is Beautiful*, p. 32

¹⁶ Lily Owens, *Works of Henry David Thoreau*.

¹⁷ Geeta Doctor, ‘Dramatic Dimensions’ in *Inside Outside: The Indian Design Magazine*, August-September 1988.

with the magic of a simplicity that seeks not to compel but to be authentic and conjure up the environment and atmosphere of the ancient past.

There is nothing better than the thatched auditorium for retaining the acoustic properties in which Carnatic fine arts can register truthfully. The mike has been dispensed with because its reproduction is not wanted and this small, circular theatre situated right in the midst of the vast all-open Island Grounds has only a nominal allowance for air to enter it so that the audibility, clarity and carrying power of the tone are ensured.

The brick background of the stage has been conceived with symmetry in its simple design and wears an 'unfinished' look. Perhaps, because of the understanding that artificial polish often obscures natural beauty. Agal (tiny mud pot receptacles for oil and wick) lamps on the fringe of the stage lend the touch of the temple atmosphere. The floor arrangement avoids seats and is completely mat-overed to accommodate about 100 to 150 rasikas in the squatting posture."—The Hindu, 1.4.1988

This testimony by the most respected music critic of Chennai sums up the concerns and hopes that accompanied my own quest from which could emerge a theatre for all. In a similar vein, the late Goverdhan Panchal, India's leading authority on traditional theatre architecture, described his impressions of a visit to Sittararangam at the conclusion of a long article wherein he voices his dismay about the prevailing trends in the designing of performance venues:

"A Kuttambalam of Modern Times

For a closed type of intimate theatre, Kuttambalam could serve as a model. It has three basic elements—the stage, the dressing room and the space for audience, sitting on three sides. In modern constructions the columns on the stage as well as the auditorium could be eliminated, and arrangement for stage lighting and sound system could be made. A theatre of this type could eliminate expensive air-conditioning because of its partially open trellised enclosures. Its acoustics will have to be taken care of depending on the construction material used.

For the new drama that is emerging, taking its inspiration from the prevalent traditional popular dramatic forms, a new type of theatre will have to be designed. There is no doubt that the realistic west-oriented drama and the proscenium theatre are on the way out as the search for theatre identity intensifies.

Such a theatre, inspired by the Kuttambalam, has already been built in Madras which I saw in my recent tour of Tamil Nadu. It is built by two non-Indians! Mr. Shahriar Dehghan (M. Arch) who hails from Iran is the architect, and his companion Mr. Ludwig Pesch, a German, is a Carnatic style flute player. Both of them who studied in Madras convinced the Tamil Nadu Government to build such a theatre and the Government granted a small sum of Rs. One lakh and twenty-five thousand for the construction and the result is the theatre of the future!" ¹⁸

¹⁸ Goverdhan Panchal, *Bharatiya Vidya Journal Felicitation Volume* Bombay, December 1987. Goverdhan Panchal held the post of Professor of Theatre Architecture at the *National School of Drama*, New Delhi. His standard work *Kuttampalam and Kutiyattam* contains a comprehensive bibliography on the subject of Indian theatre and its relation to architecture and other cultural traditions.

3 A theatre for all

Beautifully and very imaginatively conceived. India needs theatres of this kind in every village.

Goverdhan Panchal¹⁹

What was the primary objective of pursuing this project for several years before Sittrarangam was designed, built and used for cultural programmes? My original idea was to create a venue which could be tested by performing artists and experts in association with different audiences and organisations. Because I am convinced that small theatres can make a positive contribution to the communities to which they belong, this should be demonstrated at the lowest cost possible in order not to exclude organisations with limited resources at their disposal. A small theatre has the potential not just to reflect the prestige of one particular segment of society (Indian or otherwise), on the contrary, it can express the artistic aspirations and the genius of performers wherever they be, and whatever their background.

The work of Laurie Baker should be cited as the first major inspiration before the design of Sittrarangam gained definite contours. From that point onward, and due to time pressure imposed by the Secretary for Tourism of the Tamil Nadu Government, we had to consider which features could directly be adopted from local village and pandal 'architecture'.²⁰ To reduce both these influences to a simple formula, the load-bearing brick structure and the functional interior of Sittrarangam were inspired by the concepts developed by Laurie Baker; the roof structure, on the other hand, is a combination of elements derived from sources as diverse as local pandal design and craftsmanship, traditional Kerala temple architecture, and 'modern' construction engineering. With regard to most traditional theatre designs, the elimination of internal columns (that would have obstructed the view and hence reduced the usable space to a considerable degree) forms the most distinctive feature of the Sittrarangam design (Plate 3).

On grand festive occasions (utsava) of South India, when pandals are decorated lavishly, and during election campaigns, pandals constitute enormous structures, sufficient to accommodate several thousands of people. Here it should be pointed out that pandal makers are highly skilled craftsmen who are used to working very fast within a well-functioning team. They are equipped just with a knife or sickle which is used for trimming the woven palm leaves and even for cutting wooden or bamboo poles. After the festive event is over, a pandal is carefully dismantled because most materials can be re-used several times. Yet a well designed roof made from coconut leaves can also provide full protection from rain and heat for at least two years. For this reason, traditional techniques of building pandals are still in common use for building semi-permanent homes and cattle shelters, both

¹⁹ Entry in the Visitors' Book kept at *Sittrarangam* in 1987.

²⁰ The word *pandal* denotes a simple temporary structure or shed covered with coconut leaves or cloth; a *pandal* is mostly hired from a contractor to provide shade and protection from rain during large wedding receptions, inaugural functions, political gatherings and public festivities. For descriptions of temporary performance spaces such as columned halls (*mandapa*), tents (*shâmiâna*), and palm-sheds (*pandal*) as well as the manner of using them, see J.C. Mathur. *Drama in Rural India*, p. 10, p. 15 and p. 25 respectively.

in villages and urban slums. A stock of coconut leaves, wooden poles, bamboo and ropes is supplied by the local pandal contractor who is found in almost every town or village.

Whether we speak of something prosaic such as an office, something personal such as a family home, something sacred as a church or temple, or indeed a viable and appealing theatre, there are a number of characteristics, often too inconspicuous to notice, which will yield rich dividends in the long run. According to Gautam Bhatia, the essence of Laurie Baker's superb architecture can be traced to three such characteristics, namely simplicity, order and regularity.²¹ Laurie Baker had already implemented numerous low cost solutions for public and private buildings, under different climatic as well as cultural conditions. He demonstrated beyond doubt that budget constraints need not be a detrimental factor as far as comfort, functionality and beauty of a building are concerned.

Even in the context of a simple theatre design such as Sittrarangam, several questions must be raised before even dealing with matters relating to 'style' and 'ambience'. The actual requirements of the local community need to be evaluated very carefully and translated into a suitable space with proper seating arrangements, acoustics, climatic properties.

Goverdhan Panchal also stressed the need for a "harmonious balance of the physical, physiological and psychological in its original environment".²² For this reason, our design was to be as 'essential' as it possibly could be, and suited to demonstrating that in the arts, more often than not, 'less is more'. For instance, no permanent decorations are required in an auditorium where the art and the artists are the real 'embellishment'.

Beautification of a small theatre

Decorations of artistic merit (such as described in ancient treatises and other literary works), or those made of expensive material, are generally problematic as far as their display in public spaces is concerned. Even though they may be desirable as decorations for a theatre or community hall, it is self-evident that a valuable work of art must not be displayed in any public building unless there is a provision, as in the case of a museum, to have it guarded all the time. For this reason, one should welcome the confluence of 'local' and 'classical' customs and artistic traditions on the occasion of a music or dance performance.

For artists, architects and organisers, there is unlimited scope to harness and celebrate cultural diversity rather than conforming to outdated performance conventions. There are many good reasons that might even make this approach a viable business proposition, for instance the uniformity that characterizes the modern lifestyle endured by most 'normal' persons almost anywhere in the world.

It is a fact that the expression of diversity has characterized Indian cultural life for many centuries. The expression of this diversity by means of a 'live' performance in an inspiring setting is bound to constitute the highlight of a visit anywhere in India. Memories of a unique performance are equally precious for a 'Person of Indian Origin' yearning to discover

²¹ Gautam Bhatia, *Laurie Baker: Life, Work, Writing*, p. 66.

²² Viswanathan, Lakshmi. 'The Other Culture'. Madras: *Indian Express*, 29 March 1986.

his or her 'roots', an Indian citizen from any other part of the country, and a foreign visitor in search of the essence and vigour of Indian culture.²³

Indian performers often bring a photograph of a revered guru or saint, or a sacred image with them. At the same time, they tend to be surrounded by people—relatives, disciples, hosts—who gladly contribute to the artistic atmosphere. They should therefore be encouraged to contribute by way of auspicious and decorative geometric floor patterns (kôlam),²⁴ flower offerings and oil lamps (Plates 12 & 14).²⁵ The total effect is bound to be heightened if most of the auditorium is kept plain rather than distracting the eye.

The kôlam, also known as rangôli in other parts of India, is more than a temporary, improvised type of decoration: it exemplifies a quality of experience and participation which is also the essence of a successful dance, music, drama or puppetry performance if we transpose its two-dimensional lines into time and space. Gowri Ramnarayan, a renowned music critic based in Chennai, conveys the process as well as the experience of a kôlam quite succinctly:

"You spare more than a few minutes to admire the kolam. The large circular design made by dribbling rice flour between thumb and forefinger has lines and curves, squares and circles of geometrical precision. But there is nothing methodical about this precision. It is not a calculated form but spontaneous effusion. It releases the imagination to create a riot of patterns of sheer beauty, a different one each day. Perhaps because the instant art of kolam does not permit reflection or correction, it allows great freedom and scope for originality. The circles and squares remain constant, but no pattern can be reproduced in its exact permutations and combinations. The elaborate, lovingly ravelled details are always a little different each time. ... It is an expression of pure joy. Exhilaration. It is a work of art."²⁶

In this manner, a high level of community participation and interaction can also be achieved before and around a performance. Hundreds of performances in Sittrarangam have demonstrated that this type of constructive interaction between artists, teachers, school children, students, organisers and audience is more than wishful thinking; such interaction is an opportunity waiting to be put into practice. Success depends, of course, on a combination of factors like imagination, attention to details, and an atmosphere that is conducive to fostering mutual respect.

What could be more rewarding and inspiring for all involved than knowing that each performance or workshop has a character of its own? It is for this very reason that events staged in Sittrarangam are still remembered so vividly even after many years.

²³ See also Appendix 5 'Personal comments'.

²⁴ Rukmini Krishnamurti and Gowri Ramnarayan (ed.), *Kolam: A living tradition of South India*, Postscript: "The ritual art of kolam [consists of] elaborate patterns of dots and lines drawn with rice flour or paste over the frontyard and before the household deity in the homes of Tamil Nadu. It is a transient art which is rubbed away by footprints and passing traffic during the course of the day, only to be renewed with a different pattern the next morning."

²⁵ Full compliance with fire prevention, extinction and escape regulations for public venues must always be ensured; this includes the placement and maintenance of fire fighting equipment and keeping escape routes visible and unobstructed at all times.

²⁶ Rukmini Krishnamurti and Gowri Ramnarayan (ed.), *Kolam: A living tradition of South India*, p. 5.

4 Historical and social aspects of Indian performing arts

Every old poem is not good simply because it is old; nor is a poem without charm, because it is new; sound critics favour the one or the other, after (proper) examination; while a blockhead is guided by another's judgement.

The sutradhar (stage manager) addressing an actor
in *Malavikagnimitram* of Kalidasa²⁷

Many educated Indians are convinced that virtually every member of early Indian society was entitled to participate in artistic and literary activity:

"Dance and music along with Poetry which formed a concept of totality as Muttamizh, emerged from the pastoral setting in which the Tamil people lived close to nature. The landscape they inhabited could be identified by not only the flora and fauna peculiar to the different regions, but each locale had also its peculiar mode of music, musical instruments, dances, songs and poetic genres."²⁸

The task of professional performers was to educate and delight their audiences with the 'total theatre' summed up in the *Nâtya Sâstra*, the famous Sanskrit treatise ascribed to a revered sage known as 'Bharata Muni'. As this text is often quoted with regard to conventions prevailing in the various Indian performing arts, it is important to briefly consider the nature and scope of its influence, including that on theatre architecture, in view of its known history.

"Bharata's *Nâtya* is so comprehensive that its elements are invariably met with in a scattered manner, even in the remotest corners of our country. Its compendious nature is testimony to the unparalleled, artistic and intellectual synthesis of ancient Indian Theatre. With the help of this *Sâstra*, we are able to analyse and appreciate any theatrical form of the world."²⁹

Rather than creating a stifling atmosphere, this legacy has fostered creativity and ingenuity. As a result, Indian music, dance, puppetry and drama are valued not only for their diversity, but also for their intricacies. Kapila Vatsyayan emphasizes that

"despite regional variations, all schools subscribed to the basic principles of the *Natyasastra* tradition. The dance continued to be divided into *Natya* and *Nritta* on the one hand and into *Tandava* and *Lasya* on the other. ... many distinctive regional styles evolved and each region ultimately developed a distinctive vocabulary. ... The beginning of the contemporary classical styles—be it *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathakali*, *Manipuri*, *Orissi* or *Kathak*—can be traced back to developments in the medieval period, roughly dating from 1300 A.D. to 1800 A.D."³⁰

Yet the question of blind submission to any authority belonging to the remote past never seems to have arisen:

²⁷ C.R. Devadhar (ed., trans.), *Malavikagnimitram* of Kalidasa. Prologue (2).

²⁸ Lakshmi Viswanathan, *Bharatanatyam: The Tamil Heritage*, p. 7.

²⁹ Padma Subrahmanyam, *Bharata's Art: Then and Now*, p. 18.

³⁰ Kapila Vatsyayan, *Indian Classical Dance*, p. 7.

“The general impression of the scholars that Indian theatre offers no scope for creativity and imagination is actually baseless. The Nāṭyasāstra and other texts are like grammar and the artistes who handle them are like poets. The freedom which poets have within the frame work of the rules of the grammar and prosody, is certainly enjoyed by the actors and dancers.”³¹

In spite of its mythical dimension, it is worth considering the known history of the Nāṭya Sāstra:

“There is, however, evidence to show that dramaturgy was studied even before Pāṇini, the grammarian (third century BC). Pāṇini refers to Nāṭya-sūtras—aphoristic guides for nāṭya-s—by two persons, Silālin and Kṛśāśva. This is the only mention of these two writers of aphorisms on dramaturgy. For this reason, Bharata’s Nāṭyasāstra may as well be a Sāstra on dramaturgy for Bharata-s, i.e. actors, instead of, of Bharata—a sage-writer ... Though the treatise was, now and then, referred to by the later commentators on Sanskrit dramas, the original text was not available till about a hundred years ago. And even then it took almost three quarters of a century for the whole text to be made available.”³²

René Daumal (1908-44) summarized the mythical origin of the Nāṭya Sāstra “in the epoch of obscurity” (kali yuga, our own era) as follows:

“The gods, it is said, distressed by the ensuing disorder, prayed to Brahman to ‘produce a new Veda,’ a fifth, destined for all of the castes ... ‘And, from the substance of the four Vedas, He-who-sees-things-as-they-are created the dramatic art.’ The theatre was to be an ‘analogy of the movement of the world,’ a condensed expression of ‘the three worlds,’ the universal laws, and the ‘four motives in human conduct:’ artha [prosperity], ... kama [passion], ... dharma [duty], ... and moksha [deliverance, supramundane nature] ... Thus, each man could experience the profound pleasure of seeing himself represented, comprehended, placed in the total movement of the universe. Each person, fool or wise man, coward or hero, serf or lord, would see the justification for his existence in the harmony of the worlds, and through the door of individual emotion, enter the sacred teaching.”³³

In his paper titled Patronage in South Indian Performing Arts: Evidence from Epigraphical Records, Dr K.V. Ramesh described how all-pervasive the practice of the arts has been throughout Indian history, even in ancient times.³⁴ The class-divisions known that have obstructed artistic pursuit in recent history should by no means be projected onto in earlier

³¹ Padma Subrahmanyam, *Bharata’s Art: Then and Now*, p. 18.

³² Adya Rangacharya, *The Nāṭyasāstra*, ‘About the Nāṭyasāstra’, p. xvii; the *Nāṭya Sāstra* treatise is estimated to have been written or compiled between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD by several authorities on Sanskrit literature; see also Dr V. Raghavan. *Sanskrit Drama: Its Aesthetics and Production*, p. 2.

For a detailed discussion of the problems regarding the work’s authorship and the coherence of the available text, see Srinivasa Ayya Srinivasan, *On the Composition of the Nāṭyasāstra*.

³³ René Daumal, *Rasa or Knowledge of the Self: Essays on Indian Aesthetics and Selected Sanskrit Studies*, pp. 8-9.

³⁴ Lecture on the occasion of the centenary celebration of Max Mueller at the Max Mueller Bhavan Chennai, 28 November 2000; the author is presently Honorary Director, Oriental Research Institute (Mysore University)..

periods. In another paper titled 'Inscriptions on music from South India', he makes the following observations which are highly relevant for our present context:

"Even a cursory study of South Indian Inscriptions, especially those from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, reveals the fact that, from at least 3rd century A.D., classical as well as folk music, vocal and instrumental, had occupied an important place in the cultural life of the people of the South. Numerous references occur in South Indian epigraphs not only to professional singers and instrumentalists, but also to those who opted for music as a hobby, kings and queens, princes and princesses not exempted. For the promotion of music as a performing art, patronage was available in plenty. Besides members of ruling families of all denominations and well placed official and private individuals, temples were primarily responsible for the encouragement as well as employment of musicians, not only for singing devotional songs in praise of the deities but also for giving concerts for the benefit of the public. And there was a meaningful interaction between the royalty and temples in the promotion of this fine art. As a telling example, we may quote here a line from the Alampur prasasti of the Vatapi Chalukya emperor Vijayaditya (696-733 A.D.) according to which the ruler donated entire villages to temples in order to enable them to hold music concerts."

In her paper titled References to South Indian performing arts in early literature, Dr Prema Nandakumar quotes from several important sources to illustrate how much Indian civilization owes to widespread yet discerning participation in the arts.³⁵ All this evidence makes it clear that, rather than being the exclusive domain of a privileged class, the arts have always belonged to society as a whole; and the question arises, how this right can be reasserted in our times. Quite evidently, this question has social and economic implications since cultural life is not just a measure of political stability and peace; on the contrary, participation in cultural life among broad sections of the population facilitates the acquisition of the very skills and intellectual faculties that are needed for the creation of prosperity and social harmony. This question also involves equal rights for men and women. Women were, after all, involved in the establishment of several major institutions of modern India. Before that could happen, women had actively participated in the freedom movement, and this on a scale rarely seen anywhere else.

The elevated social status enjoyed by the women-artists of medieval Kerala is highlighted by Dr K.P.A. Menon as follows:

"A large proportion of employment in temples was reserved for women though they were not employed in government services. Among these, the post of devadâsîs was the most important to which well born and highly educated ladies proficient in the arts were appointed. It is also accepted that devadâsîs have played a prominent role in promoting various forms of performing arts and music. They were known by such epithets like Têvaradiyâl, Tevadiyâl and Adigal. Far from any kind of stigma such names had a halo of devotion and religious aura around them. Some members of the Kulasekhara household including the daughters of Sthânu Ravivarma, emperor of Kerala (844-885 A.D.), had become the servant maids of the Lord with the much venerated term of 'Adigal' attached to their names. Those days, the term 'Adigal' was fixed only to the names of kings, sanyâsins and

³⁵ Lecture on the occasion of the centenary celebration of Max Mueller at the Max Mueller Bhavan Chennai, 29 November 2000.

devadâsîs. Their status was not inferior to that of a princess of the royal household since both of them were dedicated to the Lord himself for different tasks.”³⁶

Music and poetry played a major role during India’s freedom struggle. The songs and lyrics of Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-94), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and Subrahmanya Bharati (Bharatiyar, 1882-1921) provided the emotional thrust that united people of widely different backgrounds and thereby helped to achieve freedom in a manner which was largely peaceful.

The motto of Triveni,³⁷ a highly influential periodical, expresses the prevailing optimism of the pre-independence period, and also a remarkable determination to enlist leading artists and intellectuals from all over the world in the freedom movement:

“‘Triveni’ is devoted to Art, Literature and History. Its main function is to interpret the Indian Renaissance in its manifold aspects. ‘Triveni’ seeks to draw together cultured men and women in all lands and establish a fellowship of the elect. All movements that make for Idealism, in India as well as elsewhere, receive particular attention in these columns. We count upon the willing and joyous co-operation of all lovers of the Beautiful and the True. May this votive offering prove acceptable to Him who is the source of the ‘Triveni’—the Triple Stream of Love, Wisdom and Power!”

The Music Academy Madras, founded in 1928, provided this cultural Renaissance of South India with an institutional framework. Leading scholars, artists, and patrons participated in its foundation.

Music, dance, poetry, acting, acrobatics, rituals, and a profound awareness of what the ‘magic’ of a good performance meant to their audiences, formed the tool-kit of performers who had to be as knowledgeable as they were skilled. The theory underlying the Nâtya Sâstra, a work of much historical and academic interest, is as relevant today as it was two millennia ago on account of its flexibility. But to profit from it today one needs some first hand experience in the performing arts and a willingness to understand the psychology that makes these arts work. As regards dance—just one of the many aspects of Nâtya (dramatic performance)—this relevance extends beyond the confines of Indian culture and history. This has been recognized long ago when the ‘renaissance’ of Indian dance gained momentum in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Nâtya Sâstra and the vast body of literature that centered on it or was influenced by it over so many centuries, has much more to offer than mere instructions for the proper execution of music or body movement. The chief purpose of the arts is, after all, to enable their exponents to express and evoke emotions. Complex enough to keep generations of specialized scholars busy with the extraction of its secrets, the Nâtya Sâstra is far from being fully understood with regard to the performing arts of India as we know them today.³⁸

³⁶ Dr K.P.A. Menon, Introduction to L.S. Rajagopalan, *Women’s Role in Kudiattam*, pp. xii-xiv; the author goes on to compare their role with that of the “hetaerae of the early Greek civilization or the Geishas of modern Japan”.

³⁷ *Triveni: Journal of Indian Renaissance*. Vol. VI, No. 1. Madras, July-August 1933.

³⁸ For a thorough treatment of Indian drama and the various regional styles of theatre, see Dr V. Raghavan, *Sanskrit Drama: Its Aesthetics and Production*.

If India's complex 'folk' dramas such as Terukkuttu ('Therukoothu') of Tamil Nadu or Yakshagana of Karnataka are to be appreciated, familiarisation by way of literary and documentary sources, urban presentations, and those versions that have been created for 'export' during official events abroad, is insufficient. In view of the many problems faced by traditional performers, an effort must be made to ensure that these arts will be accessible again in a pleasant and suitable atmosphere. This requires that the needs and aspirations of performers are taken into consideration to the greatest possible extent.

Although this demand appeals to common sense, it seems to be implemented all too rarely if ever. Yet the regenerative power of any cultural tradition lies precisely in the ability of a society to keep the dialogue among its various sections going. If this dialogue ceases, and the educational system, traditional or otherwise, fails to kindle sensitivity, social skills and curiosity among its participants, this regenerative power vanishes and makes room for passive acceptance of mass-culture as seen in several parts of South-East Asia.

The Cilappatikaram³⁹ is often described in terms of an 'epic poem'; while being hailed as a masterpiece of ancient Tamil literature, it also contains lively depictions of classical and folk performing arts.⁴⁰ Even today, a few masters of shadow play are capable of disseminating knowledge of diverse subjects such as myth, traditional medicine and ethics in an entertaining manner.⁴¹

The world-famous Chakyars (hereditary actors of Kerala) have preserved the tradition of Sanskrit drama (Kutiyattam) for many centuries. In order to ensure the continuance of this art, they have begun to train professional actors who do not belong to their own community or lineage. In return for sacrificing their exclusive claim to this art on the basis of ritual conventions, Kutiyattam has attracted new talent and, thanks to persistent efforts over a number of years, gained worldwide recognition without having to abandon its chief characteristics or essence.

A staggering number of better and lesser known art forms could be added to this list to bring home the point that in the arts too, the true India lives in her numerous villages and provincial towns. Even today there are a number of reputed artists who live and work in places like Irinjalakuda, Udupi and Kanchipuram, to name but a few regional centres where city and village life are still strongly interwoven. To these artists it is self-evident that further urbanization of cultural life, accompanied by artistic depletion of the regions where they come from, would be disastrous for the social fabric of urban and rural society alike.

Mahatma Gandhi, a staunch advocate of rural development, observed:

"Mere withdrawal of the English is not independence. It means the consciousness in the average villager that he is the maker of his own destiny, he is his own legislator through his chosen representative. India became impoverished when our cities became foreign markets

³⁹ See Bibliography, Prof V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*.

⁴⁰ See also Prof S. Ramanathan, *Music in Cilappatikaaram*, and Prof V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*.

The era in which the *Cilappatikaram* was written (said to either belong to the 2nd or the 9th century AD) has not yet been established unanimously; see also Dr Prema Nandakumar, *Manimekalai*, Introduction, p. ix.

⁴¹ See also G. Venu, *Puppetry and Lesser Known Dance Traditions of Kerala*, and S.A. Krishnaiah, *Karnataka Puppetry*.

and began to drain the villages dry by dumping cheap and shoddy goods from foreign lands.”⁴²

The same could, of course, be said about most commercial mass entertainment which is being spread relentlessly and ever more evenly around the globe with the help of satellite television. Although in the above quotation, Gandhi refers to economic problems that prevailed before India gained independence in 1947, little is being done by way of cultural activity in rural areas of contemporary India, other than ‘dumping cheap and shoddy goods’ already lamented by Gandhi. Urban culture, on the other hand, is being stimulated by lavish public as well as private expenditure.

In the cities, rural life maintains a token presence through decorative objects of sentimental value and simple household implements. In affluent homes one sees rustic antiques, furniture and other collector’s items that have lost their function in village homes and stables long ago. Thanks to several decades of effective promotion of the design and manufacture of intricate textiles in several centres, the brighter side of rural life is also represented in the form of the beautiful designs seen on saris and other fabrics. The virtues of rustic life tend to be extolled in terms of ‘simple living and high thinking’. This suggests that village dwellers are to be envied by their urban counterparts. At present, this remains wishful thinking as far as most of rural India is concerned.

With improved facilities, be it to promote education, health care, and general prosperity, the notion of ‘cultural identity acquires a new meaning—its connotations become more dynamic and constructive than under conditions where deprivation and social exclusion is a daily experience of many citizens. When living standards improve, ‘tradition’ becomes a matter of pride for the general population, not just the urbanized elite. It also becomes an avenue for social integration put into practice, Small steps in this direction are better than none, and surely preferable to grand official schemes and the usual lipservice to noble ideals.

All this requires perseverance and love both for people and the arts they care for. Without suitable venues, wherever these people live, none of this can happen. In the absence of such venues, living culture simply ceases to touch the lives of common people, and other cravings take over their lives.

Life without culture is brutalized and savage, and a general decline of the faculties or skills that seek expression or participation in the arts—faculties that every child is born with—marks the breakdown of civilized society as such. Every school or college teacher knows what this means on the basis of daily experience, and how this affects every aspect of civil life. The preservation of one’s own cultural heritage must therefore stimulate active participation of common people and the artists who matter to them, their local or regional idols and neighbourhood artists alike. Representing culture in museums and archives is never enough, never and nowhere.

Living communities need cultural centres, today as in the past, and in India as anywhere else in the world.⁴³ The objects of beauty that we admire today are tangible contributions to world culture and were made by active members of civilized society who bequeathed them

⁴² Louis Fischer, *The Essential Gandhi: His Life, Work and Ideas*, p. 291.

⁴³ “Every [South Indian] village had a common dancing-hall (*kalam*).” V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*, Chapter titled ‘Village and Village Life’, pp. 61.

to posterity. To a large extent, these objects derive their lasting value from specific sources of inspiration, the emotions experienced by these human beings, and also the material circumstances that lead to their creation, be they musical instruments or accessories used in dance and theatre performances.

5 Access to the living arts

When I succeed in ridding the villages of their poverty, I have won. I would say if the village perishes, India will perish too. India will be no more India.

Mahatma Gandhi⁴⁴

Puppetry is believed to be the earliest form of the performing arts to evolve anywhere in the world. Indian puppetry constitutes a 'living treasure' whose origins are so remote in prehistory as to match the age of most archaeological finds that attract international visitors to the great museums around the globe. Yet most inhabitants of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Bangalore or Chennai are unaware of the very existence of traditional Indian art forms such as shadow play for want of performing opportunities. In several countries, presentations of the Ramayana epic and other themes of Indian origin are even popular with the masses.⁴⁵ Perhaps it has to do with the fact that shadow puppet players in those countries succeed in cultivating their art with a higher degree of variety, aesthetic refinement or dignity.

Urban migration has been described as "a process of mutual poisoning" of big cities, small towns and villages.⁴⁶ E.F. Schumacher suggests that life has to stay attractive for people living outside the metropolitan centres. Hence participation in culture—now a mostly a prerogative of city-dwellers—must be restored to all sections of society, no less than the right to live in peace and have their children educated properly.

The 'quality of life' experienced by an individual cannot be measured in monetary or legal terms alone. Participation in the arts, whether actively or passively, greatly enhances the quality of life even for 'the common man':

"If the town life was rich, the village life was equally so. ... The villagers were not altogether cut off from the activities of town life. ... The monotonous life of the villager was often enlivened by rural amusements of varied character. Every village had a common dancing-hall (kalam). Even the village women took part in these public performances like the tunankai, a kind of dance."⁴⁷

The history of our civilizations does in fact suggest a link between intellectual and artistic developments on the one hand, and prosperity based on social harmony on the other. Artists contribute much more to their respective societies than has generally been acknowledged in modern times. This is not to suggest that the arts should be instrumentalized for ulterior purposes, but without some form of 'enlightened intervention', namely disinterested and professional management, some forms of the performing arts are bound to become uprooted or subjected to homogenisation. Some are even bound to disappear, and the reasons for this development are clear: no art can survive in the absence

⁴⁴Louis Fischer (ed.), *The Essential Gandhi: His Life, Work and Ideas*, p. 291.

⁴⁵ Jan Mrázek provides a vivid account of the popularity enjoyed by Javanese shadow play (*wayang*) whose traditional forms manage to coexist with modernized versions influenced by TV and cinema; see 'Javanese Wayang Kulit in the Times of Comedy', pp. 107-172.

⁴⁶ E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful*, p. 169.

⁴⁷ See chapter on 'Village and Village Life' by V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*, pp. 61.

of participation, social responsibility, personal appreciation, and intellectual stimulation by way of constructive criticism.

Japan regularly bestows the recognition as a 'living monument' to a number of exponents of rare arts and crafts. This recognition sets them free to be creative and to do what they know and love best without having to constantly worry about their livelihood. The skills of India's performing artists were eulogized in ancient works and remain available to all of us to see, hear, and enjoy. Apart from such enchantment, these arts constitute a vast cultural reservoir which was shared by a large part of mankind in South, South-East, and Central Asia, and even Europe for over two thousand years. It is in the nature of largely oral traditions and hereditary transmission that very little has been committed to writing or subjected to other means of permanent preservation.

It is worth noting here that UNESCO has recently bestowed a major recognition on Kutiyattam:

"Koodiyattam, the Sanskrit theatre tradition of Kerala, has been declared among the masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. It is for the first time that UNESCO has selected art forms from across the world to bestow recognition as part of its effort to safeguard expressions of oral heritage and traditional culture.

'Koodiyattam' was selected from among 32 entries from all over the world. 'Koodiyattam' is a unique theatre tradition which survived in Kerala from an ancient past. It deals with the plays of eminent Sanskrit dramatists such as Bhasa, Harsha, Kalidasa, Mahendravikrama and Saktibhadra. While following the performative principles of the larger Indian aesthetic tradition, 'Koodiyattam' has its own distinctive characteristics that are firmly rooted in the culture of Kerala."⁴⁸

It is neither feasible nor ethical to document an art while neglecting the most important expert in the same field, namely the very artist who is not only qualified but also motivated to preserve it through his or her regular performances. But how can a living art be secured for future generations? Will audio-visual documentation, essentially an activity undertaken for the benefit of a few specialized researchers, really make a difference unless the very process of documenting a performance becomes an experience shared by an appreciative 'local' audience? Has any performing art ever been 'revived' on the basis of archival material? Although a well maintained archive is of great value to those who have created it and those capable of using it for their own research, a performing art should also remain accessible in such a manner that its aesthetic appeal can be experienced by all. If this condition is met, its potential for providing good entertainment as well as intellectual and artistic stimulation in the context of education is bound to unfold by itself because it is backed up by personal experience.

The neglect of Indian shadow play could be reversed quite easily and inexpensively if it can be staged regularly in a manner that brings back the magic of light and shadow, the glow of its colours, the music, humour and mystery of its action-filled stories. The same applies to many other art 'folk arts'. Total involvement and many skills are needed to gain a mastery over an art like shadow play. To encourage its revival in the places to which it originally belongs, would therefore benefit not only the artists themselves, but those active in the realms of education, and social work.

⁴⁸ *The Hindu*, International Edition, 26 May 2001.

Self-reliance on the part of local institutions and troupes of performers, wherever they be, requires suitable performance venues where cultural diversity can be promoted. Living culture is inherently diverse, not uniform, and manifests itself through several related branches like poetry, music, dance, drama and the visual arts. But what seems to be lacking is that sense of shared purpose, urgency and love for the arts which is needed to keep the cultural life of a community going. The tragic situation in which many performing artists are being trapped without any fault of their own has much to do with the simple fact that their art is rarely, if ever, presented in a caring manner before an audience. Artists need to meet their audience in intimate settings, today as in the remote past, in India and anywhere else in the world. But how many suitable theatres does India possess today, outside the metropolitan areas?

If our shared objective is to secure the long-term future of traditional performing arts, it would be counterproductive to get ensnared by secondary issues such as technological solutions, prestige and fund raising. To achieve something worthwhile, various complementary strategies must be developed and implemented. This requires personal commitment on the part of all the persons involved with the performing arts, wherever they live and work, and a genuine will to co-operate for mutual benefit. The most imaginative solutions towards developing congenial performance spaces are bound to be derived from the concepts underlying the arts themselves. The psychological impact and aesthetic appeal of these arts have proven to be effective for centuries. It is no exaggeration to state that, given a chance today, these arts still appeal to modern audiences if traditional performing artists are provided with suitable facilities sufficient opportunities to work throughout the year. Educational events such as classes and workshops would naturally evolve around such facilities as demonstrated in Sittrarangam over a period of two years.

Indian performing artists and their audiences would benefit most if they could build small and inexpensive theatres and also maintain them themselves. This is not even as difficult or expensive as it may appear if climatic conditions and locally available resources are taken into consideration from the very beginning. Yet in spite of their failure to serve the arts, oversized 'multi-purpose' auditoria that mimic the monumental theatres seen in major cities continue to be built at considerable expense. With some genuine interest in the needs of performers and their public, many small auditoria could be built instead. With the remaining budget, they can be filled with artistic life and spare their visitors the oppressive atmosphere exuded by shoddily built and ill-maintained large halls.

Each art forms a part of a vast and splendid mosaic, and each theatre, however small, forms an element of world civilization, as precious as any other, irrespective of size or cost of construction.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ "In the tradition there was also an unchallenged recognition and acceptance of the interdependence and interrelationship of the arts. Indeed, no art asserted its autonomy and at no time was it accepted that the artist in one medium could be effective without a technical knowledge of other media." Kapila Malik Vatsyayan, 'Aesthetic theories underlying Asian performing arts' in *The Performing Arts of Asia*, p. 19.

Being there

Although the modern mass media can support disseminate information about artists and their specialities, they cannot provide any substitute for the experience of a live performance. Even the most sophisticated multimedia production cannot convey the diversity of mutually enhancing sense impressions. 'Being there', personally rather than virtually, fosters unique processes of interaction and social integration. Neither home, workplace nor school can ever provide sufficient scope to accomplish this vital task, today as in the remote past.

According to the Nāṭya Sāstra, Bharata was entrusted with propagating a kind of 'total theatre' for a noble purpose. The performing arts were invented and bestowed by Brahma with the purpose of edifying and educating mankind when conventional sources of wisdom were no longer comprehensible. For this reason, a number of guidelines were outlined in the chapter on theatre craft and architecture. Most important among these: a modest scale is recommendable as a theatre should be intimate rather than intimidating.

The ethical and aesthetical considerations underlying Sittrarangam are, of course, being adhered to in several renowned centres of South India: Natanakairali at Irinjalakuda (Kerala), the Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts at Udupi (Karnataka), and the Tamil Natu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnerra Cankam at Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu) have contributed much to the survival and evolution of several unique forms of the performing arts. The inhabitants of their respective regions and local artists have benefitted from these efforts in equal measure.⁵⁰ The founders of these centres have succeeded in co-operating with one another. The lives of numerous old and young artists have been transformed thereby enabling them to do what they know best and excel in it.

⁵⁰ These three institutions, with which I happen to be familiar, are outstanding examples for the degree of efficiency achieved by a number of small cultural centres in India.

6 Sittrarangam and traditional Indian theatre architecture

Economically, one well-equipped proscenium theatre, with its equipments of air-conditioning, sound and lighting, push-back chairs, piles of carpets, etc., costs enormous amounts these days. In the cost of one such theatre perhaps several kuttampalam-type theatres could be built. For, what is a theatre after all?

Goverdhan Panchal⁵¹

Sittrarangam is rooted in an environment where local traditions of the performing arts and crafts are rich and varied. It resembles both the village hut, its 'parent', and the Kuttambalam, its 'noble uncle'. It offers little scope for profitable contracts and the customary 'commissions' that go hand in hand with them. Due to its small scale and the number of design elements that are borrowed from other buildings and craftsmanship, it may not attract the attention of local 'VIPs'; but the advantage of non-interference by local 'bigwigs' has often outweighed the disadvantage of being sidelined by them. In short, there is little political mileage to be made in a place like Sittrarangam. Yet it offers many artists the chance of obtaining a theatre of their own on account of its cost effectiveness.

In spite of the rather inconspicuous characteristics of Sittrarangam, it has been described as the 'theatre of the future' by the late Goverdhan Panchal, India's foremost authority on historical theatres and Professor of Theatre Architecture at the National School of Drama in New Delhi.⁵² For this re-orientation of theatre architecture to succeed, a rational approach to the modern realities of the performing arts is indispensable. This concerns all those involved in cultural activity, namely artists, organisers, and their public. Sittrarangam stands for the growth, adaption and proliferation of creative theatre architecture. The infinite opportunities it stands for are yet to be realized on a larger scale. Performing artists, after all, need performance spaces to experiment in and to interact with their public. Studio theatres all over the world provide the required flexibility and intimacy, but very little has been achieved on these lines in modern India, not even by way of caring for the concepts and structures bequeathed by Indian tradition.⁵³

As seen earlier, many authorities on the performing arts claim that originally, patronage was not confined to a small elite but also ordinary people. In many places, performances can be assumed to have taken place in pillared temple halls (mandapa), public squares or open fields after harvest, with 'stage' and 'auditorium' demarkated temporarily. The popular Yakshagana dance-drama of Karnataka, based on episodes from the epics, is typically performed in such surroundings, particularly in the coastal region where it originates. It has been revived in the second half of the 20th century and again enjoys great popularity ever since. Today it is being taught in a drama school in Udupi whose graduates find employment in one of the many troupes that tour this vast region with considerable commercial success.

⁵¹ Goverdhan Panchal, Preface to *Kuttampalam and Kuttiyattam*, p. 10

⁵² Goverdhan Panchal in *Bharatiya Vidya Journal Felicitation Volume*. Bombay, December 1987.

⁵³ "For the new drama that is emerging, taking its inspiration from the prevalent traditional popular dramatic forms, a new type of theatre will have to be designed." Goverdhan Panchal in *Bharatiya Vidya Journal Felicitation Volume*.

Similar performances of popular drama are also staged in many other parts of rural India today. There are numerous professional, often itinerant troupes, although it is not often that they perform in the confinement of an urban theatre. They continue to perform long plays based on mythological themes and characters, but also incorporating contemporary themes by way of political satire and social criticism, and rarely do they feel obliged to adhere to the aesthetic norms defined by scholars past or living. While congenial theatre architecture would greatly enhance their appeal to a sophisticated urban and international audience, these troupes are not in any way dependent on any particular type of infrastructure, being used to performing under almost any circumstances offered by their ever changing local patrons. While appreciating, and perhaps even envying, their self-reliance, we should not forget that popular or traditional drama constitutes but one segment of the immensely rich and varied spectrum of Indian performing arts. These various arts complement or enhance one another, and the coarser vocal techniques and gestures needed to reach a large rural audience cannot be applied to a dance performance based on a classical piece of music.

The 'classical' and 'semi-classical' branches of the performing arts express the genius and ethos of several poets, composers and dramatists whose work is rightly reckoned among the greatest contributions to world literature and music by any acceptable critical standard: Kalidasa, Jayadeva, Tyagaraja, to name but three from a long list of Indian names now associated with the world's cultural heritage. Their works are not mere fossils meant to remind us of a remote past or an exotic and glorious civilisation. Such notions may be common enough; but they are counterproductive and largely due to a lack of immediate and personal experience of the powerful nature of great art. Art often operates independent, if not 'in spite', of one's personal taste or cultural conditioning if the conditions for its experience are right. It is in this context that the question of a theatre or auditorium arises, namely the need for spaces where all attention is focused on a particular artistic event rather than on the circumstances or persons that facilitated it. This purpose may, of course, also be served by a luxurious building with state-of-the-art facilities, if money is no consideration, but for the rest of us, other ways of serving the arts are equally worth considering. In short, without facing financial constraints, or in spite of these, good theatre design should support artistic activity wherever it flourishes, not vice versa.

Most Indian schools and colleges own a spacious multi-purpose auditorium or theatre where school-plays, dance, drama and music competitions are presented at least once a year. These venues are designed with their main purpose in mind, namely large assemblies, congregations and 'official functions' whereby visiting dignitaries are received or honoured in a formal manner. In this context, many performances consist of popular entertainment while others are characterized by the joint participation of amateurs and professional performers or teachers of an art.

With the emergence of an urban class of professional artists and teachers, most performers quickly liberated themselves from their dependence on hereditary patronage and ritual activities in the service of some temple authority or feudal court. It is in this context that theatres and auditoria were first built in the late 19th century. With newly found confidence, the urban middle class began to found music societies (sabhas). Prestigious festivals were started by groups of citizens all over the country. Annual music and dance conferences were organized and still attract visitors from all over the world. Many schools were established where music and dance can be studied by all. After a long struggle for freedom, and with

understandable pride in its accomplishments, the urban elite of independent India adopted architectural styles that exude prestige and self-confidence rather than simplicity or humility.

Yet the 'classical' forms of dance, drama and music require a much higher degree of concentrated attention from an audience than any of their 'popular' counterparts. In the former, every detail and nuance, be it intonation of the main speaker's or singer's voice, facial expression and finger movement of a dancer (mudra and abhinaya respectively) have a literal meaning as well as a more suggestive, symbolical, psychological or aesthetic one. However, such refinement also tends to the use of exaggeration, amplification or magnification by technical means in order to reach a large audience because such manipulations distort the experience of a performance and change the very nature of the event.

Historical evidence

The caves of Ramgarh, Udayagiri and Ajanta are regarded as the earliest performance spaces because of certain correspondences of their layout with descriptions found in the chapter of the Nāṭya Sāstra devoted to the Nāṭya Sāla ('theatre hall').⁵⁴ To serve as fully-fledged theatres, these sites would have been equipped with additional features made from wood and other perishable materials. Such additions, perhaps of a temporary nature, are likely to have resembled those arranged at the hundreds of small and large monuments that are converted into performance venues for festivals across Europe during the summer season. Nagarjunakonda is a better known and documented early example of a theatre built with masonry, having a pillared mandapa, and seating arrangements on three sides of the stage.

During the Pallava era, a beautiful stage was carved out of a large living rock protruding from the sandy seashore near Mahaballipuram. The grotesque feline heads seen around the platform account for its present popular name, Tiger Cave (Plate 1). This unique archaeological site is widely believed to have served as an open-air stage on account of its excellent acoustic properties.

Many major temples have special mandapas (pillared halls) where dance and music could be performed before a large audience. The Kuttambalams of Kerala were specially designed as theatres within the temple premises at Trichur, Irinjalakuda, Guruvayur and other places (Plate 2).⁵⁵ Their correspondence with the Nāṭya Sāla has been dealt with in detail by Goverdhan Panchal in his book Kuttambalam and Kutiyattam:

"[Indian theatre architects] still condemn the actor and the playwright to the outmoded 17th century proscenium theatre. A theatre form is intimately related to the dramatic form which results from the given social requirements. This has been so through the ages in all countries. ... The kuttampalam is the descendent of the ancient classical theatre of Bharata, like its drama, Kutiyattam. A descendant need not be an exact replica of its forerunner. It

⁵⁴ For a detailed survey of the literary and archaeological evidence of ancient Indian theatre architecture and its relevance for theatrical performance in the 20th century, see G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Nāṭyasastra*.

⁵⁵ Personal communication by G.Venu, Irinjalakuda, December 2000.

must reflect its own individual personality, in time and space, and yet reflect its ancient lineage.”⁵⁶

European experience over a period of several decades has shown that finding new uses for buildings and other sites of historical interest—castles, monasteries, churches, even quarries and factories—is the best justification for initiating expensive maintenance and restoration projects.

In countless places across Europe, the conversion of a single ancient monument into a centre for the arts has not only proven to be attractive for the local community but also helped it to raise the substantial funds needed for restoring a site to its former beauty or grandeur. Many such projects have proven to be good investments by way of giving an abandoned monument a second lease of life. After converting it into a focal point for a prestigious festival or conference, it may attract discerning travellers and generate new employment opportunities. In this manner, even a modest but unique cultural landmark can provide the local community, if not the region wherein it is located, with a welcome source of steady income. Often such a conversion endows an otherwise insignificant place with an identity by which it can proudly distinguish itself from any other place in the world.

Even while taking the specific conditions of Indian monuments into account, there is no reason why similar projects should be confined to a few major destinations known for their mass appeal, when there are tens of thousands of smaller localities and ‘minor’ monuments to choose from. Most prospective candidates would probably lend themselves to continuous, non-disruptive cultural, educational, and touristic activities on the lines of “small is beautiful”. On the other hand, there is reason to beware of some of the more intrusive and largely destructive schemes that are being promoted in the guise of ‘tourism development’

Many of India’s archaeological sites, of which the country has such a disproportionately large share to take care of, incorporate structures that were originally designed for (or used as) musical presentations, dance and drama. The pillared dance mandapas in the temples erected by the Chola, Hoysala, Vijayanagar and Travancore dynasties are too well known for the attractive features, although most cannot be used for their original purpose for a number of reasons.⁵⁷ Many palaces and mansions have spaces that are superbly designed and served as auditoria or dance halls for many generations. The eminently beautiful palace at Padmanabhapuram (southern Tamil Nadu), the former residence of the Travancore dynasty, has a dance hall whose features are worth noting in this context.

With little effort and a modicum of imagination, hundreds of open-air venues could be identified within a short time if a survey were conducted for the purpose of reviving the original ambience wherein India’s performing arts heritage could be experienced in the most congenial manner, without dislodging or damaging a single wall or tree, and without any need for amplification or even electrical facilities. Apart from the potential touristic revenue of such an approach, the long-term benefit could and should even be greater by way of strengthening local culture. It remains to be seen whether a sizeable section of India’s ‘opinion and policy makers’ will opt for a fresh outlook that will enable them, and in their

⁵⁶ Goverdhan Panchal. *Kuttampalam and Kutiyattam*, Preface.

⁵⁷ The entire text of the ‘Devadasi Act’ (a law passed on 26-11-1947 and still in force), is provided by Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story in *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, p. xxi.

wake the general public, to profit from the rich and diverse European experience in this field. It is important to remember here that its relevance is by no means confined to that in tourism-related areas, although it is here that the effects of bad or good planning become manifest in a rather short period of time. In addition, South India enjoys the advantage of having long spells of dry weather. This means that open-air performances can be planned without the considerable risks taken by organisers in other parts of the world where dry and warm weather cannot even be predicted for any given season. It goes without saying South India has several regions where open-air performances have flourished traditionally, and in several places still do: notably in Tamil Nadu (Kanchipuram and Melattur in the Tanjore district), and coastal Karnataka (the region around Udupi).

Even in the 'colonial' period, theatre architecture continued to produce interesting, but less frequent or spectacular results than one would expect in the land of the Nāṭya Sāstra. The Sangeeta Mahal, a theatre in the palace premises of Thanjavur, and the palace theatres at Kolhapur and Trivandrum are famous for their exquisite acoustic properties. These and numerous other examples prove that India's architectural tradition offers a variety of practical solutions for different needs and conditions. It is hard to comprehend how little dividend is derived from cultural riches that are available in plenty, like sand on a beach. These riches consist of skills, capacity to work with dedication, professional experience, fond memories, imagination, and a variety of talents that have been waiting for so long, and continue to wait for suitable outlets. Yet outlets are few and far between. Should access to living culture indeed have become the domain of a privileged few when it is believed to have percolated down even to the lowest on the social ladder for so long? And when should this divide have manifested itself, in the largest democracy on earth which recently celebrated 50 years as a secular and modern state? Mere pride in a 'great and ancient cultural heritage' will hardly make any difference to countless artists whose voices remain unheard and whose lives are marked by continual insecurity. Their misery is, to a considerable degree, caused by an involuntary state of isolation from their public and therefore easily avoidable if more and better conditions are created for them to share their art.

What is much needed today is a sense of solidarity, a reaching out to those artists who work under less enviable circumstances throughout the country. Without it, a great and irrevocable loss of artistic expertise becomes inevitable.⁵⁸

The systematic creation of a multitude of cultural outlets could effectively reach millions of people who presently lack an opportunity to partake of their own artistic heritage for want of suitable venues. But nothing could ever be regarded as a 'suitable venue' unless it can also be supported, utilized and maintained by a local community. At the same time, it would be futile if not counterproductive to 'reach out' to non-urban communities without respect for their way of life or historical perspective. This effort would also be pointless unless it is informed by a conviction that there must be room for new perspectives or even experimentation as far as any living art is concerned. The enthusiasm one can observe

⁵⁸ In this context it is worth mentioning that there are several initiatives in this direction: V.P. Dhananjayan and his wife Shanta, the noted *Bharata Natyam* duo based in Chennai, have established 'Bhaaskara', a cultural and educational institution near Payyanur, the region of Kerala where Dhananjayan hails from. (See *Sruti* magazine, issue 204, Chennai, September 2001, p. 5). Other cultural projects have also been established to bring culture back to the rural communities where they had evolved long ago but languished due a lack of professional opportunities to rural migration. Two groups, one based in Mumbai and the other in Chennai, vie with one another to foster a unique form of drama known as *Bhagavata Mela* at Melattur village near Tanjavur (Tamil Nadu).

wherever and whenever a performing art is available as a living experience, as an 'interactive' event, rather than an heirloom to revere, even among the supposedly 'illiterate masses', should be an eye-opener to anybody who claims that cheap films and TV 'soaps' are all that can be 'sold' to a contemporary public. Far from it!

Timber, bricks, mud and other perishable materials were available in plenty almost everywhere in ancient India and therefore used for most buildings. For this reason, the majority of early theatres, particularly from the Buddhist era of South India (the age of Bharata and Illango Adigal) either decayed or were destroyed long ago.⁵⁹ Although archaeologists and historians may have good reasons to deplore the perishable nature of these materials, the many benefits derived from using them even now cannot be exaggerated, be it in terms of economy, comfort, or ecology. Such considerations are often dismissed by 'modern' citizens, but their scorn is rarely backed by good arguments other than short term profitability.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, one of the leading personalities of the 20th century, has succinctly stated what traditional aesthetics, philosophy, arts and crafts can mean to modern Indian citizens:

"Visionaries from time to time have tried to remind mankind not to lose this essence of life —what the Indians called *rasa*, and what in modern parlance is referred to as 'quality'. Morrison, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Emerson in the West, each in his own way, according to his own light, Hamada, Inagi, Tagore, Gandhiji in the Orient, pleaded for this element of excellence in life. The very basic values that constitute this are different. They are not to be assessed by the cost of materials possessed, their weight or size, nor measured by the mere volume of knowledge acquired. ... What we seek today is not a repetition of the old pattern, be it Indian or colonial, but a positive contribution to strengthening the quality of current life."⁶⁰

Sittrarangam was originally developed around two specific objectives, namely to (1) create a functional small theatre which can later be adapted to suit local conditions and the needs of different art forms anywhere in India, and (2) demonstrate the technical and economical feasibility of a 'Theatre for All' by using indigenous technology and locally available materials.

This being a primarily pragmatic and functional approach, it was neither possible nor desirable to merely copy features or dimensions associated with any known or historical Indian theatre; nor was avoidance of similarities a consideration as long as proven features could be justified in the light of the above objectives. For instance, the unique architecture of the Kuttambalam fulfils its function in a particular cultural and climatic environment. This type of structure requires the use of wood which is a very scarce and expensive material today. Because none of the traditional Kuttambalams is presently accessible to the public in the sense of a regular theatre or auditorium, it cannot even be established whether a Kuttambalam would be suitable for presenting any art form other than Kutiyattam and related forms of dance and drama of Kerala. Nevertheless, Sittrarangam resembles the Kuttambalam on account of its steep roof (Plates 3 & 6) and the open sides with window grilles leaning outward for good ventilation and protection from rain (Plates 2 & 3). But there

⁵⁹ Illango Adigal is the author of the Tamil epic poem *Cilappatikaram* who flourished in the early centuries AD (precise dates not known).

⁶⁰ *India's Craft Tradition*, Preface.

the resemblance already ends. Apart from the smaller dimensions of Sittrarangam and the use of low-cost construction materials, the most obvious difference is that the existing Kuttambalams are all rectangular whereas Sittrarangam is based on a circular plan.⁶¹ The reasons for preferring a circular rather than a rectangular design were the need to simplify and speed up construction on the one hand; and minimising expenditure while maximising useable space on the other.⁶²

With regard to the seating arrangements, Sittrarangam is modelled on the ‘amphitheatre’ pattern. Its semi-circular tiers (Plate 3) embrace the curved stage which ensures that all spectators enjoy an equally good view. The excellent acoustical properties resulting from this arrangement are further enhanced by the domed roof and the curvature of the backstage wall (Plates 3, 4 & 7).⁶³ Thus, with the help of a simple and cost-saving design (which could even be enlarged to some extent without compromising on safety), all requirements of a theatre have been taken care of.

⁶¹ According to Dr V. Raghavan, a circular type of theatre (meant for a mixture of classical and regional dance styles) is mentioned in a work titled *Bhāvaprakāśana*; see G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Nāṭyaśāstra*, p. 196.

An oval variant of the *kuttampalam* is referred to by Goverdhan Panchal in *Kuttampalam and Kutiyattam*, p. 66: “But the one at Chengannur was oval-shaped of which unfortunately only the stone pedestal remains now as the superstructure is destroyed”; see also p. 141, plate C: “Model in Trivandrum museum of Cengannur *kuttampalam*”.

⁶² Since his visit to *Sittrarangam*, Sri Ammannur Madhava Chakyar (the greatest living exponent of *Kutiyattam*) expressed his appreciation of *Sittrarangam*’s architectural features on several occasions according to his disciple, G. Venu (Director, *Natanakairali*).

The enthusiasm expressed by an orthodox exponent of Sanskrit drama is, quite interestingly, shared by a renowned Tamil playwright, N. Muthuswamy, who hailed *Sittrarangam*’s unique properties on several occasions; the experimental *Koothu-p-pattarai* theatre company founded by him even used *Sittrarangam* for several years during rehearsals, international workshops and public performances.

⁶³ “There is nothing better than the thatched auditorium [= *Sittrarangam*] for retaining the acoustic properties”, wrote the music critic of *The Hindu* in the review dated 1.4.1988 *The Hindu*.

Form follows function

Is it possible to find architectural solutions that serve the needs of various theatre 'users' in a manner that is both satisfactory and affordable?

To arrive at such solutions we first need to distinguish three groups of participants: (1) on stage, (2), facing the stage, and (3) behind the scenes. These three groups are, of course, not abstract entities but consist of real people who are conscious of their social rank. It is therefore desirable to consider the ways in which a new theatre will either reinforce, disrupt, or re-arrange this social context before and during a performance.⁶⁴ Such reinforcement or disruption tends to be intentional in grand building projects; yet even in smaller projects like this small theatre, such effects should not be left to chance.

In practice it is quite common, of course, to see a particular person participating in the activities of each 'group' during different moments of a given public event such as a theatre, dance or music festival.

On stage

For obvious reasons, any self-respecting performing artist wants and even needs good 'audience-rapport'.⁶⁵ Without 'audience-rapport', a 'live' performance is meaningless and the art might as well be delivered by other means such as still images, video film, or sound recording.⁶⁶

To facilitate good audience rapport, the stage of *Sittrarangam* is virtually embraced by the audience. As a result, the auditorium does not have empty appearance when viewed from the stage even if there are few members in the audience.

The power of many forms of Indian dance and drama to capture and hold the imagination of their spectators can, among other things, be ascribed to the minimal use of stage props. It matters little whether the venue is a permanent stage structure with elaborate decorations (such as that of a traditional kuttambalam theatre), or just an area demarcated from an open ground (such as often used by Yakshagana drama artists).

⁶⁴ A typical example would be the aim of visibly elevating the status of a small group of patrons by various means, notably by segregating them from the rest of the audience, providing them with better chairs, separate entrances, and even a 'VIP lobby'. A visit to *Sittrarangam*, on the other hand, eliminated such barriers and was nevertheless appreciated by many members of the urban elite, including those enthusiastic visitors who are routinely treated as VIP elsewhere.

⁶⁵ The hereditary performer of a ritual art may be the proverbial exception to this rule, just as the artist who makes his living by way of providing background entertainment during social gatherings such as marriages or political gatherings; but even here, the line between mere entertainment and artistic aspiration tends to be blurred more often than not.

⁶⁶ Indian TV directors commonly attempt to re-create the ambience of a temple or palace 'auditorium' during a dance or music programme; yet it has also become rather common for dancers to make the presence of several video cameras, mixers, monitors and even its operators so central and visible a feature as to almost destroy the 'live' character of such a performance.

Facing the stage

All members of the audience benefit from good visibility and audibility and are entitled to it; and artists wish to be seen and heard well by all (Plate 3). This not only increases the appeal of a performance but also furthers the legitimate economic interests of performers. For these reasons, the primary concern of those involved in designing a theatre or auditorium must be to ensure that all spectators enjoy good visibility and audibility during a performance. Needless to say that this is all too rarely the case in Indian auditoria. But there is no reason why this should not change. New structures are sometimes needed to replace older ones, and many other venues are being built each year in order to meet the cultural aspirations of large communities who move to the suburbs and townships that represent modern India.

“But to go back to the more intimate ‘theatre’, it seems that troupes that earn their living by giving frequent performances and move about from village to village and fair to fair, prefer to put up raised platforms so that the audience can watch the performances from at least three sides.”⁶⁷

Keeping such customary arrangements in mind, Sittrarangam has been designed without columns and with a flexible seating arrangement which totally dispenses with furniture (Plate 13).

Members of the audience can choose from three ways of seating themselves:

- the customary ‘Indian’ way of sitting on the floor (in front of the stage); this cross-legged posture is still being preferred by many Indians today if at all available;
- seating on low tiers like in the largest area, the central circular area of Sittrarangam;
- seating on ‘benches’, namely the walls enclosing the circular auditorium; the actual height of this type of seating diminishes towards the rear end where the floor level is higher compared to that near the stage.

In this manner, every conceivable preference can be accommodated. Those spectators who prefer sitting on a conventional chair with a backrest (mostly foreign visitors and elderly persons) can choose from a number of seats available along the parapet. This low wall is fitted with a wooden type of grille which, in fact, constitutes the enclosure for the auditorium and replaces both walls and windows. This grille has proven to be useful for supporting a person’s torso and, in addition, provides a welcome extension of the space available for seating members of the audience during a well attended performance.

⁶⁷ J.C. Mathur, *Drama in Rural India*, pp. 17-18

Behind the scenes

Owners of a theatre hall or auditorium have to weigh their options and constraints against aesthetic and social considerations with regard to architectural features. In the case of small theatres based on the basic concept of Sitrarangam, organisers of performances stand to benefit from the fact that structural simplicity reduces the cost of construction and maintenance. After all, economy is a major concern which cannot simply be wished away or concealed when setting out to build a theatre which needs to be maintained for many years to come. Very few music societies and theatre clubs can afford presenting public events in comfortable and well equipped halls. But the 'multi-purpose' structures of South India they normally use are far from being ideal venues for the types of art they seek to promote. As a result, the performances witnessed are mostly far less enjoyable than they ought to be if the actual artistic standards of performers are taken into consideration.

A conical roof has the advantage of eliminating the need for supporting pillars that would otherwise obstruct the vision of many spectators. Chairs are not required either in Sitrarangam. For the owners of a regular theatre, chairs are a major cost factor to be taken into account since they require periodic repair or replacement. The absence of chairs in Sitrarangam not only constitutes a major cost saving factor; it also facilitates the thorough cleaning of the entire building on a daily basis.

Considering the shortage of rehearsal and workshop space (a function which Sitrarangam fulfilled for several years for professional and amateur troupes), the absence of chairs is a veritable boon to artists. Of course, it is also a major saving. In the case of a low-cost structure like Sitrarangam (which has hosted up to 200 adult spectators although it was not designed for so many), this saving is likely to surpass a quarter of the total investment; and the high the cost of maintenance and periodic replacement is not even included in this estimate.

Most importantly, however, chairs do not provide the flexibility of using a portion or all of the theatre the way traditional conventions as well as contemporary drama directors would like to use it. Performers sometimes need to be able to move freely among their audience. A player's entry from behind can be the dramatic highlight of a theatrical performance anywhere in the world, and has become a regular feature in modern Western drama. But the same device is not uncommon in Indian ritual performances, plays containing ritual elements, and processions either.

"Introduction of principal characters in the rural theatre is also done in another, more spectacular, manner, namely, ceremonial and processional entry of the cast. Entries can be either from behind the stage, or through the audience. Where the entry is through the audience, it is generally in the form of a procession. Ramlilas in U.P. and Delhi are noted for the processions of the cast. ... In the Yakshagân of Kuchipudi village in Andhra Pradesh, the processionists are accompanied by persons sounding gongs and carrying torches. Processional entries seem to have evolved as a device to bring some order among the

audience whose high-pitched excitement finds a release at the sight of the cast slowly moving towards the stage or arena.”⁶⁸

Is there any relationship between Sittrarangam and its illustrious predecessors as regards their known features? Sittrarangam was designed in full awareness of their historical importance and unique aesthetic qualities. Their excellences ought to be made a subject of thorough study among architects and scholars of the arts, and also be made accessible to the art loving public which is hardly aware of their existence. Yet it is obvious that it would be futile to merely imitate the outward features of any building like the ancient Nāṭya Sāla, or any one of the extant Kuttambalams, unless this can be done in a well defined cultural context. Under modern conditions, any superficial attempt in this direction is likely to fail in artistic terms. It is viable alternatives to ‘modern’ multi-purpose theatres, also in economical terms, that deserve to be investigated with greater vigour than witnessed until now. In this sense, Sittrarangam was a first attempt to identify and demonstrate some of the essential features of a ‘living’ theatre while reflecting the cultural needs of our time.⁶⁹

Environment, materials and atmosphere

Sittrarangam does not offer any ready-made solutions for all purposes. As a ‘minimal theatre’, it constitutes a structure to which much could be added but from which, in the absence of superfluous features, little or nothing could be removed. It combines functionality with the multifaceted beauty seen in some specimens of traditional rural architecture.

What could be more rewarding for an artist or architect than drawing inspiration from a particular cultural, social and physical environment? The landscape that furnishes the materials to be used during construction are among the most significant sources of inspiration for a public building, and climatic conditions need to be considered in order to ensure that artists and visitors are comfortable in terms of temperature and ventilation. The relationships between these materials and the colours associated with various characters in a play, their costumes, jewellery and make-up, the musical instruments used in it, are all worth looking into. This means that none of the features seen and heard in a dance programme or theatrical play are to be left to chance; quite on the contrary, all of these features need to be analyzed and justified in the context of a particular production.

In the context of the ideas expressed in the Nāṭya Sāstra, a theatre forms an integral part of a larger concept wherein the performing arts are held sacred, not because of their ritual connotations or supposed antiquity, but because of their ability to transform the outlook of their audiences. What does this transformation entail? It means that a passive frame of mind is abandoned in favour of one that is discerning, confident and resourceful; something

⁶⁸ J.C. Mathur, *Drama in Rural India*, p. 22; for a full description, see G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Natyasastra*, p. 267.

A good example for a spectacular entry is the final appearance of the demoness Surpanakha in *Kutiyattam* drama whereby convention requires the actor to enter from the rear of the theatre via the door at the centre of a *kuttambalam*.

⁶⁹ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay proposed to adopt a similar orientation long ago: “What we seek today is not a repetition of the old pattern, be it Indian or colonial, but a positive contribution to strengthening the quality of current life.”; Preface, *India’s Craft Tradition*.

which every generation of parents and teachers hopes to impart to its children or pupils. For these reasons, the locality where a theatre will function, the atmosphere to which it will contribute must be scrutinized and thoroughly understood.

The use of natural or environmentally friendly materials to the greatest possible extent, and the fact that no sophisticated machines were needed for the construction of Sittrarangam, have also been major considerations. Several qualified observers, like the late Goverdhan Panchal (a professor for theatre architecture), have noticed with approval and appreciation that Sittrarangam has demonstrated how a small theatre can be built. Moreover, such a theatre can be built and maintained virtually anywhere at low cost, provided local artists and craftsmen are involved; and it matters little whether this happens in an urban and in a rural environment. Thus the theatre can be described in terms of an indigenous or 'Ayurvedic cure', as it were, to the problems of many artists and their public, since it is made of indigenous ingredients. Such a combination of traditional and modern ingredients can help to meet the needs of all those who neither want nor could afford an 'allopathic cure' The latter can be seen in the form of the expensive but ineffective proscenium theatre of the 'Western' type which is seen in all Indian cities and towns today.

If a theatre is meant to facilitate social cohesion, it will benefit from a primeval, perhaps even mysterious dimension. Rather than attracting attention to itself, it is likely to resemble a 'cave'⁷⁰ or the sanctum of a Hindu temple which is known as garbhagriha (literally 'womb chamber'). For a brief time, such a theatre transports its audience from normal time and space to another dimension where real surrounding, the theatre and other viewers included, do not exist any longer. The experience of such a 'void', however brief, is known to have a profound and lasting impact on the human mind. During a performance, it offers an ideal canvas on which the characters of a play, or the movements of a dancer, acquire greater depth and clarity than in surroundings that divert our attention to themselves.

Not surprisingly, many if not most 'Western' studio theatres consist of little more than 'black boxes', vacant spaces wherein directors and performers collaborate with specialists (stage designers, sound and light engineers) in order to create a world of their own for each production or presentation. While scale and resources are bound to vary from place to place, the underlying reasons for preferring basic, rather than lavish, infrastructural conditions are quite similar wherever artistic purposes reign supreme: artistic experience ultimately carries much more weight than any prestige derived from a particular building.

To illustrate this point, it is necessary to bear in mind that almost all traditional Indian drama troupes continue to use an amazingly effective yet simple device, the hand-held curtain. Rather than being mounted on a mechanism in order raise or lower it without any visible human effort, the curtain is just carried onto the stage before and after each scene, and it does not even cover the entire height of the character it 'hides':

"The curtain is, therefore, used for a different purpose in several rural theatres of India; it introduces important characters by stimulating curiosity. Ancient treatises on dramaturgy and the theatre in India refer to the curtain as the yavanikâ or pati. Scholars have argued about the connection between the yavanikâ and the Yavanas—the name given to the

⁷⁰ Several early archaeological sites in India (e.g. Ramgarh, Ellora, Nasik, Junagarh) consist in fact of natural caves. To serve as theatres or auditoria suited to present and enjoy music, dance and drama, these sites would have been modified. Corresponding evidence is found at these and other early sites as well as in literary references; see also G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Natyasastra*, p. 198-9.

inhabitants of ancient Greece. One theory is that as the task of holding the curtain used to be given to slave-girls usually from Greece or Western Asia, the curtain itself came to be called yavanikâ. Today, it does not matter who holds the curtain, but the curtain, a feature of some traditional forms only, has both ritualistic and psychological value. Though Kathakali of Kerala—one of India’s best known classical dance-forms—is not drama in the strict sense—dialogues by the actors being non-existent—the holding of the curtain before important characters like Bhîma, Râvana, and Hanumân is a most dramatic spectacle. The character stands behind the curtain and special music evocative of the personality begins. The actor himself holds the upper edge of the curtain with his fingers and as the music gets into a higher tempo, the actor shakes the curtain a little and the audience gets an occasional glimpse of his face—sharp and fleeting like the shimmer of a rapier in the sun. After such excitement, the final and full-dress appearance of the actor is the climax to the building up of a fantasy. We are transported into another world and from then onwards we are in an unmistakably receptive mood.”⁷¹

When the curtain is dropped or removed by an actor, often after prolonged and breathtaking agitation, this is also said to represent the removal of Maya—‘unreality’—from the spectator’s mind. Thus a simple but highly effective act opens an otherwise unknowable world of ‘cosmic reality’ which transcends our daily lives. On similar lines, an oil-lamp lit before the audience and fuelled with coconut oil during the performance in full view of the audience is bound to leave lasting and profound memories behind.

Rather than merely providing an opportunity to indulge in ‘nostalgia’, Sittrarangam has served as an artistic laboratory. Here the sensibilities of the human psyche could be explored and experienced by all, not just a privileged few. It demonstrated for several years and at a very low price that any small theatre has the potential to become a theatre for all.

⁷¹ J.C. Mathur. *Drama in Rural India*, p. 19; for a detailed description of the characteristic way in which curtains are commonly used in drama performances both today and according to early Sanskrit and Tamil writers, see also G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Natyasastra*, p. 200-4.

7 Sittrarangam: model for a facility serving cultural tourism

The Small Theatre (Tamil Sittrarangam) is a chamber auditorium specially designed for Indian performing arts. Based on rural architecture, it provides a congenial atmosphere for traditional performers of dance, music and folk arts, and their audience alike.

From a brochure for visitors to Chennai.⁷²

"India—where the festival never ends" read a slogan on the popular international aerogramme sold by the Indian postal department in the 1980's. It depicts the attractive silhouette of an Odissi dancer. Aimed at stimulating foreigners' interest in living culture, its simple message conveys the importance of the performing arts to Indian society in an effective manner. The meeting of cultures is, of course, no recent phenomenon—far from it!

A. L. Basham observes:

"The main requirements of the West were spices, perfumes, jewels and fine textiles, but lesser luxuries, such as sugar, rice and ghee were also exported, as well as ivory, both raw and worked. A finely carved statuette of a goddess or yaksi has been found in the ruins of Herculaneum."⁷³

Sir Mortimer Wheeler has dealt with the same phenomenon from various angles, both as an archaeologist in India, and as an authority on ancient Roman civilisation:

"The evidence for Western craftsmen in India in the early centuries AD is not limited to the early tradition or legend of the purchase of St Thomas in Jerusalem to serve as master-builder of the palace at Taxila; this story is widely supplemented by substantive references to the employment of 'Yavanas' (Greek-speaking Westerners) by Indian princes in numerous capacities about and after the beginning of the Christian era. But this is, at best, only a part of the story. The so-called Graeco-Buddhist or Romano-Buddhist or Kushana art which emerged and flourished in and beyond ancient Gandhara—the environs of the Afghan-Pakistan frontier—between the second and fifth centuries AD contained also other elements in its composition ... [We] have a basic trafficking of goods transmuted into a trafficking of ideas."⁷⁴

Other sources on Indian history and culture contain ample references to the extensive trade relations maintained between India and other regions to her North, East and the West, often for many centuries:

"References to Yavanas, who were often engineers, in early Tamil literature, and commercial intercourse between southern India and the West, especially in Augustan times, suggest acquaintance with Greek and Roman ideas."⁷⁵

⁷² Brochure jointly published by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and the Tamil Nadu Tourist Development Corporation (TTDC); Chennai, 1987.

⁷³ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That was India*, p. 231.

⁷⁴ Mortimer Wheeler, *Roman Art and Architecture*, pp. 226-9.

⁷⁵ A. L. Basham, *A Cultural History of India*, p. 146.

Since the 1980's, international tourism had just emerged as a major earner of foreign exchange with much scope for further growth. Equally important is the potential of generating employment in several remote areas by way of developing tourism in a well planned manner. For this reason, the cultural advisor to the Prime Minister of India had no problems in justifying the massive spending by the central government on the 'Festival of India', and several grand festivals could be held in the U.K., France, U.S.A., Japan, the Soviet Union, and Germany. In addition, many bilateral cultural exchange programmes have since been organized on a smaller scale. Besides their contribution to increasing tourist arrivals in terms of quantity, Indian dancers and musicians must be credited with raising the level of cultural awareness among visitors to their country. Many of these visitors ask themselves why the arts are not presented as beautifully in India as during the international festivals abroad.

The director general of the European Community (EEC) for development affairs warned that tourism development must avoid miscalculations and failures:

"The host country and its inhabitants must be encouraged to present and to hold up their values. Music, dance, fine arts, crafts, literature and theatre constitute an expression of national identity. Once they are lost due to an adaptation to the supposed tastes of tourists, the destructive impact on culture easily outweighs the economic benefit."⁷⁶

India is the original home of Shadow play and many other forms of puppetry and arts which often are far too sophisticated to be termed 'folk' (Plate 8).⁷⁷ Puppetry of ancient India is considered by some authorities as having influenced certain aspects of Greek drama.

For several years, Peter Brook's celebrated Mahabharata theatre production played before full houses in Europe and the U.S.A. It was the result of several decades of studies, research and exposure to Indian drama such as Kutiyattam and Yakshagana, among others. Most aspects of the modern drama are based on the idea of 'Total Theatre' which already pervaded modern classics such as Bertold Brecht's works just as many musicals and the productions of the spectacularly influential multicultural troupe Theatre du Soleil of France. Yet the underlying principles were already known to the author and commentators of the Nāṭya Sāstra for over two thousand years.

There is ample scope for developing 'micro centres for the performing arts' all over India. Such centres will benefit performers, visitors and local people alike. Most tourists feel honoured if they can become patrons for traditional artists, as experience has shown in many places. A 'conversion' of tourists from being mere consumers of products and services to becoming connoisseurs of their host country's arts is also rewarding in economical terms. To be valued by foreign visitors, an art form should (1) be presented authentically and thus preserved for the benefit of future generations in India just as for visitors; (2) remain or become available where it originated rather than being uprooted and transplanted to suit convenience; and (3) stay accessible at all times, be it as an integral part of local customs or

⁷⁶ In conjunction with the Tourism Fair at Berlin, March 1988.

⁷⁷ For an illustrated overview of Indian puppetry, see Jiwan Pani, *Living Dolls: Story of Indian Puppets*.

celebrations, or as an educational asset. This process requires that numerous performance spaces are created wherever the arts belong.⁷⁸

For a very small investment, small theatres on the lines of Sittirarangam can strengthen cultural traditions particularly in many places where they are threatened with extinction due to their present inaccessibility. The cost of building it was equal to that of a modern family automobile made in India. Yet the present design can seat up to 200 spectators without need for either amplification or other expensive gadgetry. Modified versions could be expanded or reduced to host audiences numbering between 100 and 400 and also reflect regional building styles. Such theatres can be integrated into any cultural environment. Their cost of construction can be minimized by way of harnessing locally available materials and techniques.

⁷⁸ For a detailed case study in the field of South Indian classical dance, see Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*.

[illegible]



Plate 1 Open-air stage ('Tiger Cave') near Mamallapuram

Eleven feline heads adorning the Tiger Cave, as this site popularly called today, are evocative of the royal titles of those Pallava kings whose names incorporated the 'lion' just as their sculptures (e.g. Rajasinha). King Mahendravarman Pallava (early 7th century AD), a musician and poet in his own right, is credited with the authorship of two farcical Sanskrit plays, *Mattalavilasa Prahasana* and *Bhagavadajjukka Prahāsana*.⁷⁹ A small cave temple—endowed with all the characteristics of a place of worship—is seen near the Tiger Cave. The ruler who commissioned it clearly wanted the arts to be appreciated in their own right and therefore assigned them a majestic place of their own.

The Tiger Cave is a pleasant location for enjoying music and poetry in the cool sea breeze after a hot day. The central platform comfortably seats up to four persons in either sitting or standing position.⁸⁰ Additional performers could be accommodated on the raised platforms seen on either side of the main stage. Theatre decorations depicting elephants are mentioned in the *Nāṭya Sāstra* and seem to have found their playful interpretation in two life-sized elephant heads to the left of the platform. Reliefs inside the niches above the

⁷⁹ For more information on this extraordinary king and his dynasty, see Michael Lockwood, *Mamallapuram and the Pallavas*.

⁸⁰ With the help of three other musicians (for *tambura*, *mridangam* and violin), and encouraged by the local representative of the Indian archaeological authorities, I made a practical test during a moonlit night by playing the flute there myself in the early 1980's. It was indeed an ideal venue to perform at. All the listeners agreed that, without any need for amplification, the venue's sound diffusion would be sufficiently balanced for at least 100 listeners.

elephant heads form the 'mahouts'. The stairs leading to it provide convenient access even for a poet, musician or any entertainer attired in some formal or fanciful manner and equipped with clappers, cymbals or some stringed instrument like the ancient South Indian harp, the yazh. An attractive performance, perhaps resembling a formal presentation of Harikatha Kalakshepam commonly seen in Tamil Nadu until recently, is easy to visualize in such a setting.⁸¹

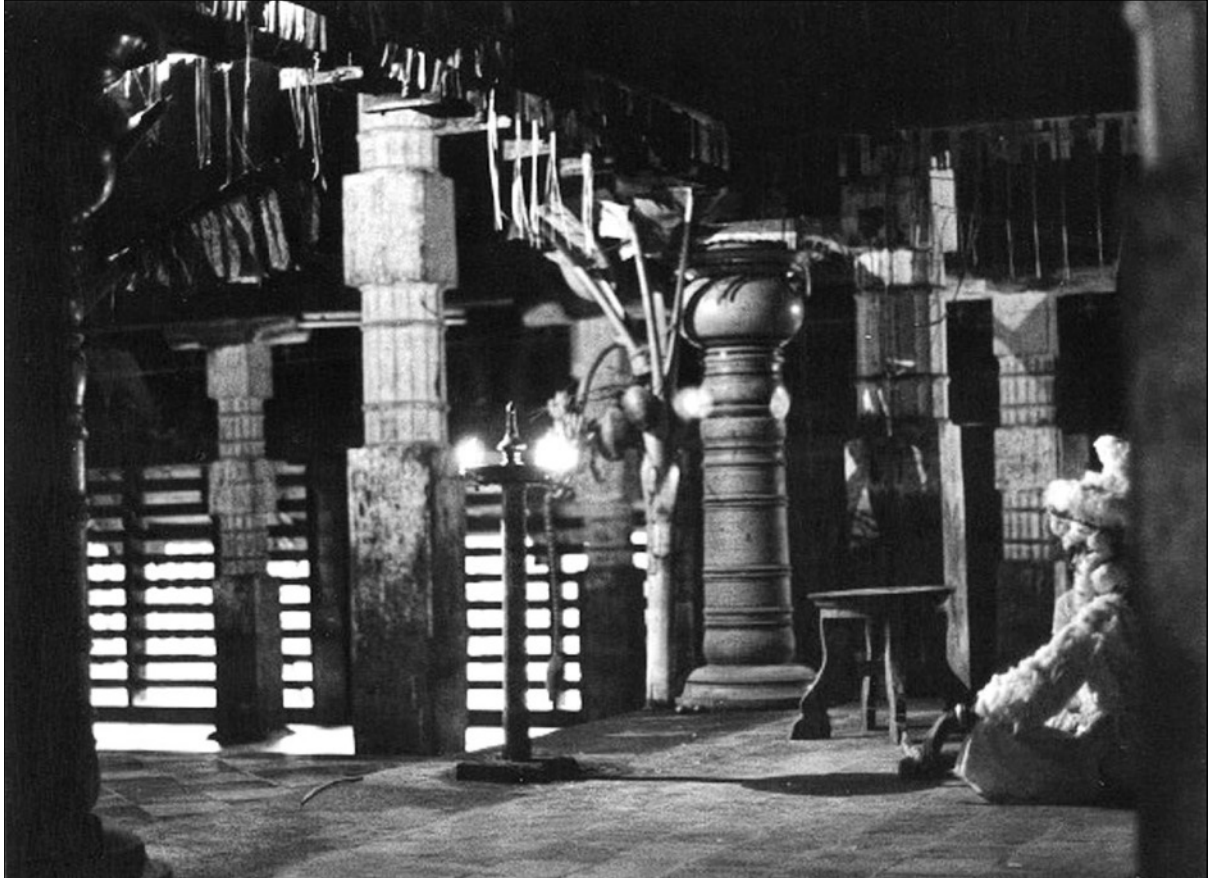


Plate 2 Kuttambalam stage (Irinjalakuda / Kerala)

Designed for performances of Kûttu ('Koothu', mono acting) and Kutiyattam (Sanskrit drama), the Kuttambalams of Kerala represent the oldest surviving tradition of theatre architecture in India. Acting as a hereditary profession is continued by the Chakyars, exponents of Kutiyattam, the sole tradition of Sanskrit drama surviving today.

⁸¹ *Harikatha Kalakshepam*, a dramatized musical discourse on a religious or mythological theme, is the meeting point between drama, music, poetry, religious and philosophical scholarship. Its foremost exponents have employed subtle puns and anachronisms as a means of social commentary. (Even Mahendravarman Pallava's aforementioned comedies provide such a commentary.) Although this complex art is no longer popular, it epitomizes the ethos of the performing arts of South India, with their strong literary foundations, a broad outlook idealized by their best exponents, and an affinity with the various social reform movements since the early 19th century.

See also Dr Premeela Gurumurthy's monograph on this subject, *Kathakalaksepa: A Study*.

Ritualistic enactments at the Kutalamanikkam temple in Irinjalakuda (shown in this plate) are not for the public but constitute religious offerings lasting for several days. They also serve the purpose of providing professional actors with an annual rehearsal. Here they verbally recite their story-lines which would otherwise be enacted.

The audience is seated on three sides of the stage in a Kuttambalam. Its massive timber roof, covered with copper shingles, is supported by stone columns. (Some other Kuttambalam roofs are covered by tiles.)

As in Kathakali dance drama,⁸² a large oil lamp placed centrally in front of the stage is the centre of all activity on stage. This source of light has always been charged with symbolical significance.

Under the guidance of its Founder-Director G. Venu, Natanakairali has initiated a unique programme under which Kutiyattam as well as the arts folk arts allied to it are brought back into the Kuttambalams. The practice of staging performances in temple theatres was discontinued long ago in most places. Before all the existing Kuttambalams can host performances on a regular basis again, numerous hurdles are yet to be taken. In view of the favourable response to this initiative also among local audiences, it is to be expected that the loss of several priceless and irreplaceable historical buildings promises can be averted.



Plate 3 Interior of Sittrarangam (Island Grounds / Chennai)

To ensure the best acoustical properties for classical music, the wall separating the stage from the two dressing-rooms (to the right and left of the central corridor leading backstage) is curved. It forms a kind of 'parabolic mirror' which results in a diffraction and even

⁸² Kathakali is a vernacular drama form derived from Kutiyattam and based on Malayalam rather than Sanskrit.

distribution of speech and musical sound all over the auditorium. The acoustic properties are further enhanced by the conical roof and the absence of side walls. Instead of walls Sittrarangam is enclosed by wooden grilles (similar to those seen in a Kuttambalam) and low walls which also serve as benches for those who cannot comfortably sit on the central floor area.

The floor of the auditorium is covered by traditional grass mats that are easy to clean and cheap to replace.⁸³ Equally good view and audibility of all sounds are facilitated by a layout based on the amphitheatre pattern. Similar to the fan-shaped layout of many modern theatres (but not identical with it), this seating pattern has the advantage that all spectators are naturally focussed on the centre of the stage.

Before a performance, a large oil lamp is often lit by a senior or prominent member of the audience in order to create an auspicious and welcoming atmosphere. For Kathakali and other art forms originating in Kerala, the oil lamp is also kept alight during a performance and prominently placed on the stage itself.

Two arches to the right and left are reserved for accomodating items brought by the performers themselves. Such temporary decorations typically include the customary Natarâja ('Dancing Shiva') idol displayed during dance performances and pictures of the principal artist's guru.

⁸³ It is a South Indian custom to leave footwear at the entrance of a temple or home. As this arrangement evokes a sense of intimacy (like being invited to a private home) or even sanctity (like entering a temple), it was fully accepted by the public even though this is not customary as far as theatres are concerned. In this context, however, even the cultural elite of Chennai enjoyed sitting on the floor not merely out of necessity but quite voluntarily. Not only does it help to keep the interior clean, it also reduces wear and tear of the floor mats.

Plates 4, 5 and 6 Sittrarangam: phases of construction



Plate 4

The bird's-eye view illustrates the space and thus cost-effective design; it matches the shapes of the stage with that of the two dressing-rooms. Sittrarangam has a larger store-room (which also serves as a 'gents' dressing-room') and a separate 'ladies' dressing-room'.⁸⁴ Both dressing-rooms are placed under the same roof, but outside the circular auditorium space. A removable bamboo screen conceals the passage leading to the dressing-rooms. Such a screen also provides separate 'doors' for the stage entry and exit of actors in accordance with Indian theatrical conventions.

The dimensions of the stage are carefully calculated to provide the minimum area needed for performing Bharata Nāṭyam dance. This art form requires more space than most other traditional forms of drama and dance (stage depth: 6m). A larger stage is conceivable, but here we sought to foster a lively rapport between performers and their audience. Therefore we chose not to exceed the dimensions actually required by the exponents of any traditional art form.

⁸⁴ This small difference in terms of floor space results in an asymmetric position of the 'central' passage leading to both dressing-rooms. Although this detail has not been rendered in the illustration printed on cover of this book for the sake of simplification, the asymmetric layout is noticeable to an attentive visitor to *Sittrarangam* if seated on its central axis. As a temporary screen is mostly placed before the passage, this practical arrangement does not mar the beauty of the stage.



Plate 5

There is a separate artists' entrance on stage level behind of the auditorium with a ramp instead of stairs. For safety reasons, the rear entrance is the only one with a door that can be locked from outside. The main entrance and the side entrance cannot be locked accidentally from outside nor must they be bolted from inside during a performance. (An unobstructed escape route must be kept open and visible at all times as a precaution for any emergency.) For the benefit of wheelchair users, the side entrance is provided with a ramp leading to the front row at floor level. A bathroom is attached to the rear of the building.



Plate 6



Plate 7 A South Indian vocal recital by Mani Krishnaswamy

Mani Krishnaswamy (1930-2002) was a renowned vocalist and music scholar. A disciple of the legendary 'Tiger' Varadachariar and other legendary masters of the 20th century, she also was an alumna of Kalakshetra. The distinguished accompanists seen in the photograph are Meera Sivaramakrishnan (Carnatic violin), and Ramnad M.N. Kandaswamy (mridangam). The instrument seen in the background is a *tambûra*, a four-stringed drone ('long-necked lute') customarily used to provide the basic note for both melody and the pitch of the accompanying drum.

To enjoy the classical music of South India in full measure, a listener pays attention to a rich variety of tonal variations, subtle modulations and intricate ornaments.⁸⁵ Essentially a type of chamber music, this music reaches its aesthetic and emotional peaks only before an audience of connoisseurs (*rasikas*).

As Sittrarangam became instantly famous for its acoustic properties, several renowned masters of South Indian music, including T. Brinda, Voleti Venkateswarulu, and Chitraveena N. Ravi Kiran, offered to perform here and even suggested that the 'ban on amplification' should always be maintained here.

⁸⁵ For more information on this music, locally known as Carnatic music or *Karnāṭaka Sangītam*, its composers and musicians, see Ludwig Pesch, *The Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music*.

But for special events like the annual music and dance festival (still widely known as the 'Madras music season'), a classical concert or dance performance rarely attracts large numbers. The enormous auditoria found in every Indian city and town can accommodate the crowds associated with popular shows. More often than not, poor acoustics, distortion caused by imbalanced amplification systems, and incessant manipulations by untrained 'mike operators' contribute to the corruption of fine music in most venues. Unacceptably high decibel levels even tend to cause a harmful onslaught on the hearing capacity of all listeners although a typical audience may barely comprise a hundred members on most occasions.

For many 'musical pilgrims' with a background in Western classical music Sittrarangam was a welcome alternative to the noisy, restless and therefore distracting atmosphere prevailing in most concert venues of Chennai.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ See also Appendix 5, 'Personal comments'.



Plate 8 A leather shadow play by S. Seethalakshmi

India is the home of puppetry, all types of puppets are found here in many forms which have [an] unbroken tradition of several centuries. But unfortunately they languish in utter negligence. Glamorous mass media for entertainment have pushed them to the remotest corners. It is a wonder that they still survive with a full range of variety in spite of the fact that many forms of traditional puppetry in India have become extinct.” – Jiwan Pani⁸⁷

According to K.S. Upadhyaya, leather puppetry in Karnataka is mainly practiced by Marathi-speaking exponents.⁸⁸ The shadow play still performed in Tamil Nadu and Kerala is also maintained by hereditary puppeteers whose ancestors migrated from different places. It is particularly in Karnataka that a certain diversity of puppetry is still available although

⁸⁷ Jiwan Pani, *Living Dolls: Story of Indian Puppets*, p. 7.

⁸⁸ See also K.S. Upadhyaya, *The Puppet Theatre Tradition of Karnataka*.

Upadhyaya points out that “all artistes [of Karnataka] depend on some other occupation for their living”.⁸⁹

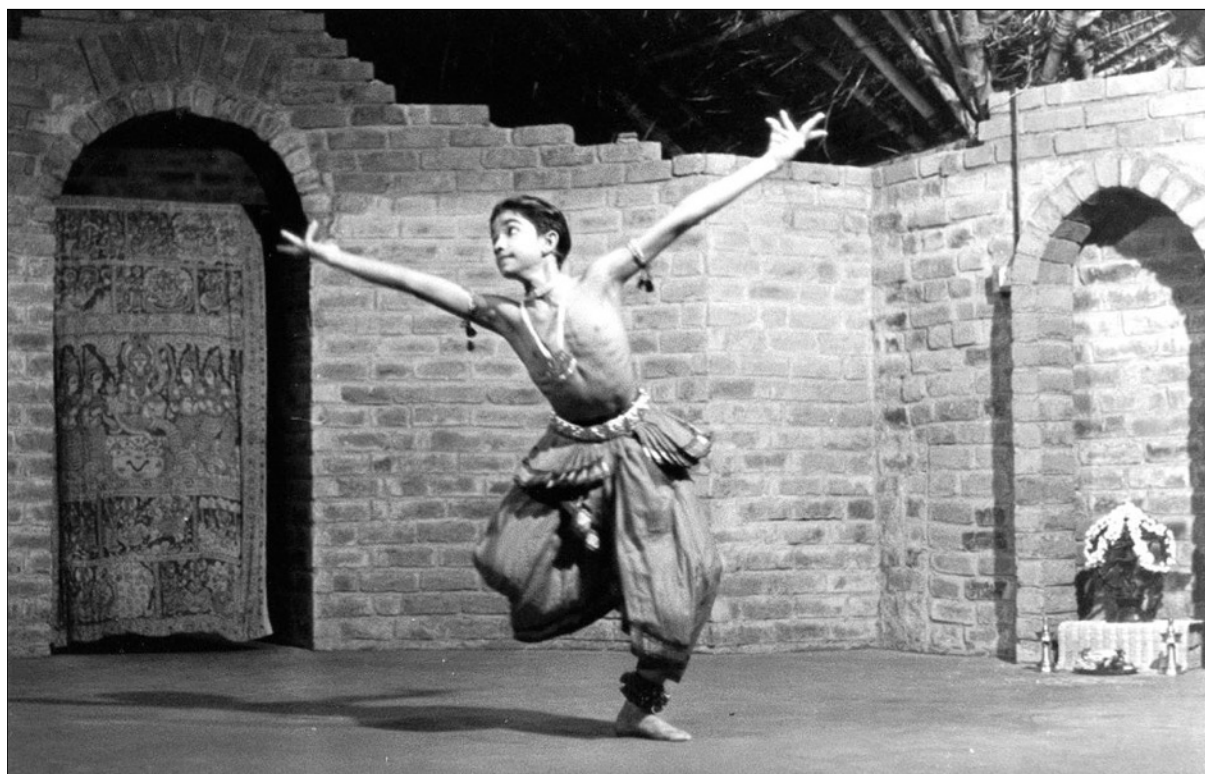
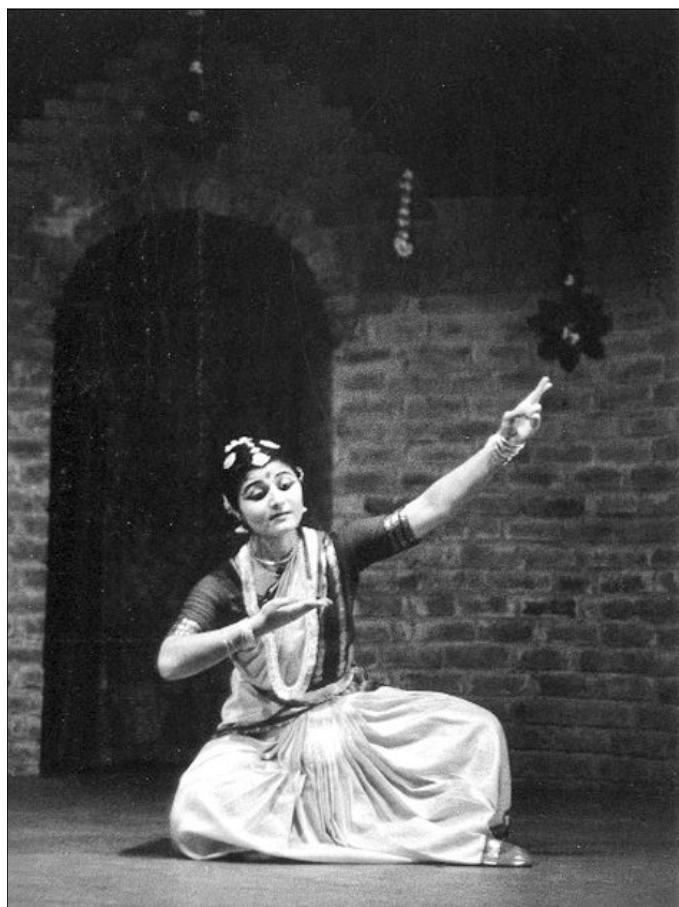
The professional pursuit of Indian puppetry on traditional lines requires an encyclopedic knowledge of many subjects: religion, myth, rituals, astrology, ethics, music, dance, and Ayurvedic medicine. The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana and the folk tales of different regions provide the literary sources for the traditional puppet plays.⁹⁰

Authentic presentations for foreign visitors as well as tours in foreign countries are a welcome means of preserving any art threatened with extinction due to lack of ‘popularity’. Performances witnessed in Sittirarangam have included many programmes for school classes and special education projects for the handicapped. Workshops for fellow artists, artisans, and educators were successfully presented at a time when the electronic mass media had, paradoxically, kindled a new desire for personal interaction. Traditional artists have since realized that their own future—the future of their art—rests in the hands of modern young people.

⁸⁹ The Regional Resources Centre for the Folk Performing Arts at Udupi has established an audio-visual archive for Indian and foreign researchers.

⁹⁰ For an overview of Indian puppetry, see Jiwan Pani, *Living Dolls: Story of Indian Puppets*.

Plates 9 and 10 Dance performances by Archita and Satyajit



Archita is a talented dancer and teacher of Bharata Nāṭyam. She was my fellow student at Kalakshetra and also graduated with its prestigious diploma. Satyajit (here at the age of 13) is the second son of the eminent duo of Bharata Nāṭyam dancers who are known as 'The Dhananjayans'. His parents, Shanta Dhananjayan and V.P. Dhananjayan, were trained at Kalakshetra and acquired their initial professional experience as leading performers of its dance-drama ensemble. The Dhananjayans and their many students continue to promote this dance style all over the world with unparalleled success.

At the time when these photograph were taken, Sittrarangam provided hundreds of talented youngsters, their teachers and parents with an opportunity to give a public performance free of charge. These events were regularly attended by discerning art lovers and foreign visitors. Many performances were covered by the city's leading music and dance critics. This public service had indeed made Sittrarangam a 'Theatre for All'. It has also shown aspiring artists and their families how to avoid the terrible expense, worries and formalities that have become the scourge of so many formal debut performances.⁹¹

It is not surprising that most artists, art lovers, students, foreign visitors and journalists who had experienced the charm of a performance in Sittrarangam were dismayed at finding out that Sittrarangam was eventually closed to the public. Requests for an opportunity to perform at Sittrarangam were received by me and V. R. Devika, the programme co-ordinator, from music and dance students long after it ceased to function as a performance venue open to the public.⁹²

Institutionalization of dance education

The internationally renowned Kalakshetra academy of classical dance and music was founded by the late Rukmini Devi and guided by her until her death in 1986.⁹³ It has succeeded in asserting its 'authority' to the present day. Many dancers benefitted from the technical, theoretical and aesthetic contributions made by the founders and teachers of Kalakshetra. For this reason, Kalakshetra was elevated to the status of an Institution of National Importance by the Government of India .

⁹¹ The public debut (*arangētram*) of an aspiring dancer has since become an increasingly ostentatious affair. Some observers dismiss it as a mere status symbol for girls from 'good families'. Yet the affluence of some of these girls' parents—boys are rarely lavished upon in a comparable manner—has created a sizeable 'industry', a global market supplied by makers and exporters of items needed for Indian dance (costumes, special accessories, jewelry, musical instruments, multimedia). The highly intrusive presence of a video crew, hired to record and edit every step from all angles, and of course also all the members of the audience, is a fashionable 'requirement' which makes it impossible for less affluent candidates or their families to even contemplate a formal debut. As a result, they are unlikely to ever receive an invitation to perform in public nor would they be noticed by most dance critics unless they take a substantial loan to cover the expenses for such a debut, not to speak of costly PR work and special treatment for VIP's and other 'wellwishers'.

⁹² Aspiring artists have not been offered any alternatives since; yet it would have been easy and inexpensive to maintain *Sittrarangam* if there had been some appreciation for the spadework done—on a voluntary basis and over a period of several years—on the part the office bearers in charge.

⁹³ *Kalakshetra*, now called *Rukmini Devi College of Fine Arts*, was founded by Rukmini Devi (1904-1986) in 1936.

Bharata Nāṭyam was looked down upon by most 'decent citizens' barely a century ago and exclusively practiced by hereditary performers. Its present refinement and prestige as a 'classical' art of international relevance owes much to the courageous efforts of Rukmini Devi. She was able to convince a circle of respected scholars and educationists of its great cultural value on account of its solid theoretical foundations and long history.⁹⁴

The conditions under which girls and women learnt and practiced 'Indian classical dance' in the past have become a subject of controversy time and again. Among other questions, the underlying dispute also has to do with a perception held by some artists that hereditary of exponents of music and dance are naturally predisposed toward greater artistic accomplishment than 'outsiders'. One dance scholar has even raised the question whether 'other families than devadasi families' are entitled to practice the art of hereditary artists. Some among the latter have felt that the popularization and institutionalization of their 'heirloom' was in fact a patronizing attempt at cultural disfranchisement rather than liberation.⁹⁵ Whether or not one feels inclined to subscribe to such views in a modern context wherein 'new pastures' have become available to both hereditary artists and 'others', there can be no doubt that the establishment of Kalakshetra changed the status enjoyed by Indian dance for good, both in India and abroad.

Rukmini Devi made a lasting contribution by way of establishing the framework for institutional dance education as well as the highest aesthetic standards for the costumes and make-up which characterize the dance dramas produced at Kalakshetra and emulated by many other institutions. It is quite remarkable how much the ambivalent attitude of traditional Indian society has been reversed within one generation, mainly thanks to the initiatives taken by the Music Academy Madras and Kalakshetra. A basic dance training is now commonly found on the curriculum of many private schools along with yoga and computer classes.⁹⁶

Male dancers

Since Uday Shankar paved the way for worldwide appreciation of Indian dance successfully toured the West in 1929-30, male dancers and choreographers from India have played an

⁹⁴ For an account of the circumstances leading to the revival of 'classical' dance in South India in the 1930's, see Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*, pp. 84-85.

⁹⁵ "As one informant remarked: 'Art is all, we *must* know how to sing or how to dance, without it *no* one will respect us.' Even more painful, in this regard, was the gradual 'take-over' of the arts by members from other families than devadasi families. This genuine injustice of society towards the devadasi artists, their artistic standards and integrity were brought to the attention of the general public by only a few people during the *antinautch* campaign that sought to abolish the institution of the devadasis and to transfer the art onto 'respectable housewives.'"

Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South India*, pp. 48-49; the so-called 'Devadasi Act' is a law introduced by the '*antinautch* campaigners' and still in force since it was passed on 26-11-1947; its text is reproduced on p. xxi; its objective was to prevent the "dedication of women as devadasis" because "such practice, however ancient and pure in its origin, leads many of the women so dedicated to a life of prostitution."

⁹⁶ See Ch. 6, 'Learning Bharata Natyam in the Modern Setting' in Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*, pp. 222-241.

important role also on Indian stages.⁹⁷ Until then, a public solo performance by a male dancer was a rare event as professional male dancers generally confined themselves to teaching and conducting the performances of their female disciples. One of the few exceptions of the past still known by his name is that of Chinayya, one of the four brothers known as 'Tanjore Quartet' (early 19th century). The four, Chinayya, Ponnayya, Sivanandam, and Vadivelu, are credited with shaping the standard sequence of dance items for what is now called Bharata Nāṭya. Today, however, there is much room for creative variations and additions to this standard sequence (mārgam), like the devotional types of songs adapted from the classical music repertoire and other items derived from modern, sometimes foreign inspired, types of dance.



Plate 11 Living theatre: Terukkuttu and Kattaikkuttu

Traditional plays in Tamil are based on the Mahabharata and other epics. Yet they also provide ample scope for the improvised, often satirical, treatment of contemporary issues such as political and social developments. Highly stylized costumes, crowns, make-up, and the mediating role of the director of the play are the chief characteristics of this form of drama. As seen in the photograph the director (here Purisai Kannappatampiran) also interacts with the audience and interprets the dramatic events unfolding on the stage.

Terukkuttu literally means 'street theatre'. As far as antiquity, popularity and professionalism are concerned, it can be compared to the Italian Commedia dell' Arte, another composite dramatic form. Some Terukkuttu troupes have found their way from the roadside of rural Tamil Nadu to the modern urban drama scene patronized by the intellectual elite; and some

⁹⁷ René Daumal (1908-44), *Rasa or Knowledge of the Self*, p. 1; this French Sanskrit scholar served as secretary when Uday Shankar first toured the West with his dance and music ensemble.

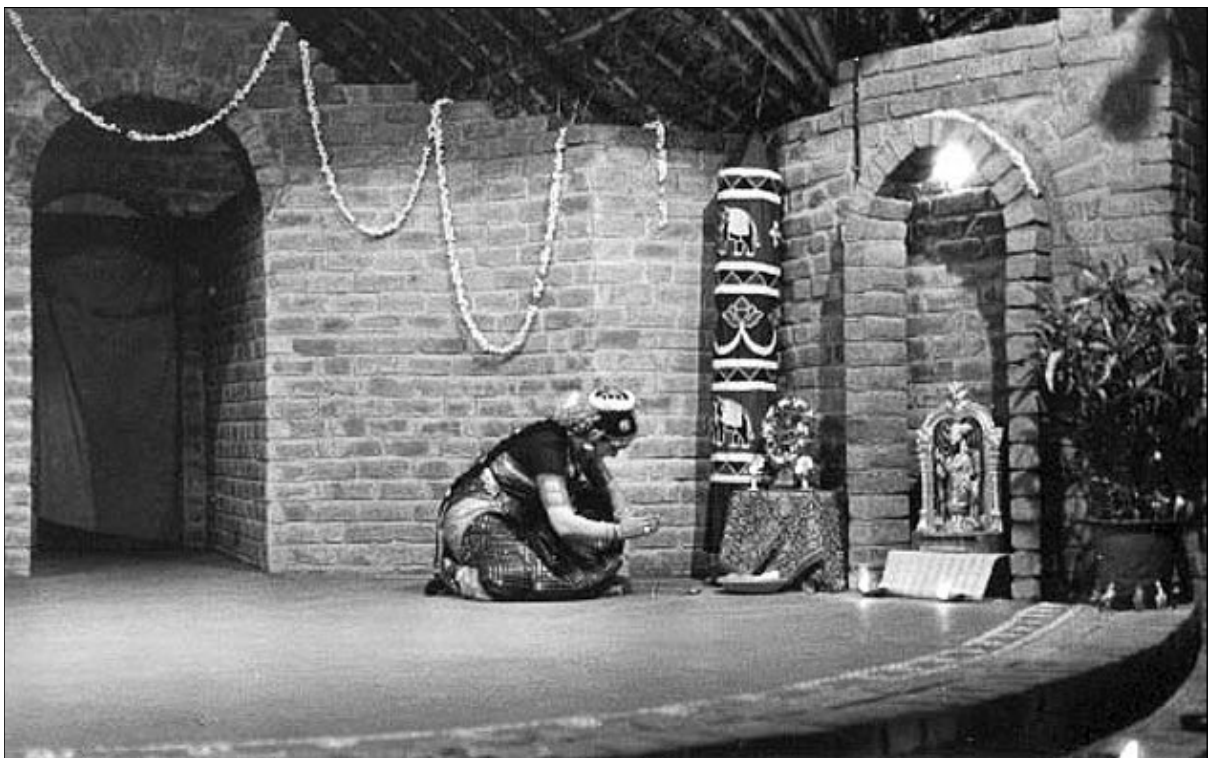
city based ensembles have even adopted elements of Terukkuttu dramaturgy to enrich their vocabulary and to endow their plays with local characteristics.

In recent years, the nature as well as the proper name of the theatre form commonly referred to as Terukkuttu (also spelt 'Therukkoothu') has been the subject of a heated debate. As the term Terukkuttu also denotes performances during temple processions in honour of a particular deity, Terukkuttu did not necessarily denote all-night, dramatic performances confined to a well-defined performance space. In view of the derogatory connotations Terukkuttu has in Tamil and its association with a feudal (caste-based) system of rights and obligations to perform, some actors have formed an association called the Tamil Nattu Kattakkuttu Kalai Valarcci Munnera Cankam in Kanchipuram. Their professional pride and style is underlined by their organizations' name because the Tamil word kattai refers to the conspicuous wooden ornaments in-laid with mirrors or decorated with coloured paper and worn by its principal characters, they have adopted the name 'Kattakkuttu'.⁹⁸

Plates 12, 13, 14 and 15 The Sittrarangam experience



⁹⁸ For a detailed description of this form of drama, see Hanne M. de Bruin, 'Naming a Theatre in Tamil Nadu' in *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol 17, no. 1, pp. 98-122; and Hanne M. de Bruin, *Katt aikkuttu: The Flexibility of a South Indian Theatre Tradition*, pp. 9-12.



Appendix 1 A theatre according to the Natya Shastra in the IIT Madras

The following text provided the outline for a student research project initiated by the present author in conjunction with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in 1983:⁹⁹

There is at present no Indian type of theatre that suits the needs of Indian performing arts regarding stage arrangements, flooring for dancers, seating arrangements, acoustics and overall atmosphere. Bharata's Natya Shastra (presumably 2nd c. AD) gives exact instructions how a congenial auditorium that comprises all these factors is to be built and how not. Individual features prescribed herein have been realized here and there but often in conflict with others. A faithful realization of a working life-size model in accordance with the Natya Shastra is the aim of the IIT Project. In order to make this project worthwhile in terms of science (building techniques employed in ancient times and their feasibility in economical and climatic conditions then and today) and art (historical implications, development of the arts, aesthetical context etc.), a number of criteria have to be accepted by all involved in its realization, documentation and experimental utilization:

- No material or building technique must be used for its construction that was not also available at the compilation of the Natya Shastra.
- No alterations of the overall design or individual features prescribed by Bharata are acceptable.
- No electricity should be used or required during construction as well as utilization by artists invited for performance (no electric light; no amplification as the auditorium is of intimate enough size).
- No aspect of the documentation work—an integral part of the project—should interfere with the authentic approach but has to be subdued and discrete (no enacting of procedures for effects' sake; no flash-light during performances etc.).

Instead:

- The suitable materials and building techniques are to be researched and documented in collaboration with traditional (rural) craftsmen who still possess a working knowledge in this field (clay-work, brick-making, masonry, natural plaster without cement, carpentry work, thatched roof-making, stage craft etc.).
- An acceptable design is to be developed that does not contradict the prescribed norms given in the Natya Shastra but can be realized at low cost.
- Traditional forms of providing sufficient light and visibility for performers have to be traced, tried out and modified to make regular concerts possible; comparative acoustic studies are to be carried out.

The theatre project comprises several areas of activity that require specialized tasks of all participants in accordance with their interest:

⁹⁹ This project was facilitated by Klaus Schleusener (head of the German language department) in his capacity as Cultural Adviser of the IIT, and supported by Prof Dr Indiresan, its Director for many years; both played a major role in the cultural life of their institution, including the theatre research project outlined here.

1. Research in traditional materials and craftsmanship as still seen in rural India; presentation of a summarized survey to the planning group with original photographs and interviews with craftsmen as well as bibliography;
2. Planning, architectural design derived from the Natya Shastra with traditional materials and techniques, perspective design for laymen and for use in publication on the subject;
3. Research in stage-craft and traditional (non-electrical) sources of stage-light sufficient for performances before an audience; greenroom [dressing-room] arrangements for performers, mirrors and other requirements;
4. Decorations (murals, carvings, floor-decorations, curtains) as prescribed in the Natya Shastra and in comparison with other historical evidence;
5. Rituals associated with construction and utilization of the theatre [Natya Shala];
6. Construction of the theatre on a suitable site free from interference of noise and traffic in a beautiful environment;
7. Documentation of the whole process of research, planning and construction and eventual utilization for performances through video, photographs, slides and cassette recordings (interviews, acoustic measurements);
8. Acoustic research: collection of comparable data regarding architectural features for good acoustics, sound distributions in various known venues (measurements with decibel-instrument), carrying-ability of various sound-sources (voices, instruments) under various circumstances (distances, without amplification, for comparison with amplification, open air and closed rooms), survey of effects of different materials;
9. Experimental utilization for documentary purposes with and without audiences (photography, acoustic measurements, improvement of lighting arrangements);
10. Public utilization through cultural organizations willing to adhere strictly to the norms laid down at the outset of the project with experienced performers in various fields and styles of art; invitation of experts in the field of performing arts from all over India and abroad to assess the qualities of the auditorium;
11. Assistance in organizational arrangements and safety(light etc.);
12. Publication of a book containing all documentary material, plans and data that serve India's cultural life by way of promoting good standards.

All those willing to commit themselves to the project are invited to enlist under any of the twelve areas given above with the Cultural Adviser.

Ludwig Pesch
Chennai, 1983

Appendix 2 Postscript to the IIT project description

Some readers will be interested to know what became of the IIT project which laid the foundation of Sittrarangam, the subject of the present publication. The student project at the IIT had started out on an optimistic note, with many engineering students enrolling and participating. The drought of 1983, however, caused a watershortage in the IIT, and examinations were held earlier that year. This development forced participants to withdraw from this projects at short notice.

The project was not revived at the IIT Madras (Chennai) but pursued by the present author in a different context. In conjunction with a number of institutions and government agencies, the project gradually took shape over a period of another three years with Sittrarangam as its most tangible and viable 'prototype' for further experimentation and research.

The agencies that mainly provided facilities and funding, were (in alphabetical order): Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany (Chennai), Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany (New Delhi), Ford Foundation (New Delhi), INTACH (Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage), Lalita Kalas Foundation, Santa Barbara (U.S.A.), Max Mueller Bhavan (German Cultural Institute, Chennai), Natanakairali (Irinjalakuda), Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts (Udupi), national Sangeet Natak Akademi (New Delhi), and Government of Tamil Nadu.

Many artists, officials and scholars associated with the aforementioned institutions as well as the Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts also offered advice and assistance.

Several symposia and lectures initiated by the present author provided ample scope for meetings among artists, scholars and other specialists where the issue of theatre architecture and indigenous technology could be discussed.

Thus the IIT project proved to be a catalyst for many other artistic and architectural initiatives. After Sittrarangam was built, many students of architecture were given assignments relating to its 'history', dimensions, and physical features.

Appendix 3 In search of an Indian theatre by Ludwig Pesch*

An Indian concert-hall or theatre today, the author believes, must be:

- i. Economical so that any cultured community anywhere in India can afford building, maintaining and using one;
- ii. Practical so that any classical or traditional performing art of this great nation can be presented in a congenial setting;
- iii. Indian through the unique integration of natural grace, timeless outlook, and the intimacy Indian artists need to establish the close rapport required for their spontaneous creativity.

If traditional Indian craftsmanship, building technique and locally available materials are again combined harmoniously on the foundation of the 'NATYA SASTRA' with its wisdom and commonsense, a solution can be found which is scientifically sound and therefore modern in the best sense. Old roots will sprout again and yield new fruit for everybody's joy and inspiration.

The absence of an indigenous Indian concert-hall

The absence of an indigenous Indian concert-hall in the sense of the 'NATYA SHALA' described in the Natya Sastra for staging dance, drama and music is to be considered as a most striking feature of Indian performing arts for any serious admirer of Indian. culture considering the richness and antiquity of forms that have come down to us in the subcontinent. As numerous changes have taken place and largely eroded the conditions of existence and continuance of the performing arts—changes that are attributed to westernization and modern technology—their survival for the benefit also of future generations cannot be taken for granted. This poses the question to any responsible art lover and researcher if questionable developments are really inevitable as side-effects of scientific development and both mutually exclusive or if there are not ways to counterbalance undesirable trends. No form of art can hope to survive if found superfluous, obsolete and socially irrelevant; yet the response of the Indian public is, on the contrary, enthusiastic and receptive whenever unknown parts of its cultural heritage are unearthed and put into the right light. The same can be said of the international discerning public, as numerous instances have proved, and no minute fraction of the whole is denied due attention if only given a congenial exposure.

At this crucial moment, when numerous forms of the 'live' arts face extinction for lack of performing opportunities, incentives and subsequently insufficient scope for young artists to make a living as professional performers, the bias in favour of self-preserving arts as poetry, painting, sculpture and archaeological artifacts must cease if the remaining time is to be utilised to give a new generation of performers a chance towards accomplishment and enthusiastic professional pursuit.

India's performing arts vs. western forms

The differences between western and Indian forms of performing arts regarding training and professional practice cannot be overemphasised as they have been completely ignored in the past. The oral form of transmission in India clearly differs from the literary and

* Ludwig Pesch, 'In search of an Indian theatre'; first published in *Cultural Dialogue*. Udupi: Indo-German Society Manipal, Vol. XII-4, June 1984.

documentary approach on which European art traditions rest. To switch from one mode to the other and discard their organic and time-proven systems of reference would certainly prove fatal for both cultural spheres and would initiate a complete loss of cultural identity. The same applies to the conditions under which performing arts are sustained. While no accomplished western exponent of any of these arts would conceive of discarding his roots in favour of Indian attributes, the same cannot be said of Indian artists who have become increasingly dependent on western forms of presentation without sustaining their authentic and congenial background for future. In our context, it is the western type of a box-stage with unnecessary backstage machinery and public-address systems—long since replaced by more advanced as well as more simplified venues in the west—that holds subtle and hallowed Indian art forms in its crude and alienating grip.

Bharata's Natya Sastra

Bharata's Natya Sastra, though approximately two thousand years old, offers a clear alternative to the obviously inadequate stages and auditoriums prevalent in modern urban India on account of its straightforward and pragmatic approach. No vital problem is left to chance which cannot be said of most modern establishments, however expensive and prestigious. And, a variety of solutions are offered regarding the size and shape of the auditorium depending on the applier's needs. As the descriptions of the Natya Sastra suggest their derivation from actual and time-proven use already at the time of the work's compilation, the lack of archaeological proof must be explained by the absence of other ancient structures suggesting the use of perishable materials. The present uncritical acceptance of all typical deficiencies in contemporary venues that put delicate artistic work to shame in comparison to any other advanced culture leaves no room for doubt that the models described by Bharata might prove insufficient for modern use.

The performer's needs

As for regular performances in contrast to noisy festival activities for the masses, small and medium sized auditoriums for a few hundred 'rasikas' (connoisseurs) should serve their purpose better than the prevailing voluminous halls in which performer and audience are completely isolated from each other physically and psychologically. Indian performers always have drawn inspiration from the close contact with discerning audiences; therefore a new approach to artistic intimacy is bound to enrich the overall experience for all involved. Smaller auditoriums dispensing with excessive height of stage, distance due to orchestra pit and wrong chair arrangements (derived from movie-houses) will make the obsolete dependence on amplification—inconceivable in the classical arts anywhere in the world—superfluous. More performances before smaller audiences serve the performers' legitimate interest in more frequent performing opportunities better than a few once in a while for undiscerning crowds.

The problem of flooring for dancers has never been sufficiently examined as most stages give reason to complain. Concrete proves too cold and hard and tires the feet unnecessarily besides becoming slippery due to moisture. Wood does not usually suit Indian dance forms with firm floor-contact and vigorous movements, besides being expensive to lay and maintain. Synthetic materials are unsuitable for many reasons partly similar to those of

concrete. As Indian dance and music forms have lived for many centuries in all their subtlety and splendour, we have reasons to assume that the key for many problems of the artists today lies in scientific research and empirical probing on the basis of traditional authoritative sources such as the Natya Sastra. As such experimenting has not been given due attention for many reasons, this requires a new approach with complete sovereignty in terms of technological and aesthetical concepts of realization: No material or technique nor technical aid should be utilized that was not available at the work's compilation many hundreds of years ago in order to gain an unobstructed insight into its evolution and utilization in the artistic process. This approach naturally involves the unresolved question of appropriate acoustics and lighting in accordance with the conditions that prevailed when many classical and traditional forms evolved.

Modern technology has failed to take such authentic factors into account as any typical public performance in India reveals today which renders grotesque and distorted many of originally harmonious combinations of costume, movement and make-up through alien modes of presentation. For performers as well as their discerning audience this poses the problem not only of alienation, scurrillity and erosion of authenticity but first of all of dignity and self-respect in a larger historical and international perspective.

Cultural deprivation

India's rural areas not only provided food and raw materials on which the country's welfare depends to the present day, but also have been a repository of cultural achievement. Today, however, the majority of India's population living outside the few metropolitan areas are either deprived of their 'cultural heritage', or never get an opportunity to find out what it could mean to them. Many, but not all artists have migrated to the big cities in search of a livelihood even though all art forms largely draw and are derived from rural origins to date. An entirely urbanized generation is emerging with no memory of the peace, purity of air, water and environment that now are conspicuous by their absence in Indian cities. This generation's art inevitably reflects restlessness and imbalance as no living art can entirely divorce itself from its environment. Yet, there are numerous artists and artisans forgotten in the remoteness of their home-villages and small towns, many of them in outstanding command of unique forms of traditional performing arts but without patronage, lobby and audience as arts now are considered the exclusive right of the educated urban elites.

Untiring field-research by a few cultural organisations have over and over affirmed the competence and accomplishment of these forgotten artists and whatever glimpses they were able to give in the centres of money and power have found keen attention of a public that has grown tired of a short-lived, uniform and mass-media conditioned cultural fare over the years. As there is no longer any doubt about the validity and universal appeal of many such dormant and sooner or later disintegrating traditions, there must be ways to sustain their heirs and sole guardians. This care—in no way a luxury benefiting a select few—cannot materialise if there is no widening of horizon of all those concerned with upholding indigenous culture. Congenial presentation that does not distort individual features of regional styles when presented in the cities must feed back into the rural environments where they have evolved and should live on.

Appendix 4 A Chamber Theatre for the Performing Arts

Project description, March 1986 – Prototype design by Shahriar Dehghan (architectural concept and Ludwig Pesch (artistic concept) *

The design has been developed over a period of three years in India in consultation with experts in the fields of the performing arts, cultural promotion, architecture and traditional architecture.

The solutions offered for various problems of performers, organizers, educational and cultural institutions and audiences for traditional and classical arts do not constitute a final blueprint but allow for adaptations and variations to suit various specialized needs.

The aim of the project is to provide a self-contained infrastructure for a congenial presentation of the performing arts for the present age. All modern requirements have therefore been considered to allow for the incorporation of up-to-date equipment (light, audio-visual and projection, air-conditioning etc.) without structural changes; on the other hand, care has been taken to make the theatre usable on a very elementary level of technology by using traditional building materials, craftsmanship, natural ventilation, visibility without expensive lights, audibility without need for microphone systems etc. Comfortable seating is provided even without need for chairs (tiers can be equally well used with and without chairs) to suit a variety of conditions, budgets and customs.

The layout in form of a square (20 x 20 m) outside and fan-shape for the inner auditorium (seating capacity 250-300) is designed for maximising capacity while maintaining high standards of convenience, safety and cost-efficiency for building, maintaining and running the theatre.

Greenrooms [dressing-rooms] and backstage can be used either for the auditorium or the optional open-air stage at the rear of the building and even simultaneously for both at the same time. Separate sanitary installations (toilets, bathroom) and an artists' entrance serve the needs of the performers. Stage proportions and height above floor-level can be modified in order to suit specialized applications.

To ensure versatility for year-round utilization with a favourable cost-benefit ratio, provisions are made for projection-room, sales and service counters, office or reception rooms above the lobby as well as protection against outside disturbances and stray light for the auditorium (indirect access, concealed apertures and doors).

* Information text by Ludwig Pesch about a scale model presented to the participants of a Symposium titled 'Presentation of the Performing Arts' (Max Mueller Bhavan Madras and Sangeet Natak Akademi, 21-23 March 1986); many of the ideas presented here were later adopted in the low-cost theatre known as 'Sittrarangam', the subject of the present monograph.

Appendix 5 Personal comments (Visitors' Book 1987, 1988)

"Sittrarangam is a remarkable boon as an auditorium with perfect audio distribution and right ambience."—K.S.S. Rajan, President, Sampradaya

"It has been a totally new and unique experience for me ... an excellent representation of what we can produce from the best of our traditional architectural practices with aesthetic sense."—Brig. R.C. Mathur

"Delightful dancing at this theatre."—R. Radha

"Beautifully and very imaginatively conceived. India needs theatres of this kind in every village."—Goverdhan Panchal, Professor of Theatre Architecture, National School of Drama, New Delhi

"It is a pleasure to listen to mikeless concerts here."—Sangeetha Kalanidhi T. Brinda

"Madras has now become richer by a small but rare jewel in the shape of the Sittrarangam."—V. Ramamurthy (I.A.S.), Government. of Tamil Nadu

"Ideally suited for holding concerts ... serene and solemn."—Prof Dr Seetha, Head of Dept. of Music, University of Madras

"The beautifully conceived architecture of the auditorium takes us back thousands of years to the pure recesses of our ancient culture. And so the wonderful acoustics carry us to the purest sound. For a person concerned with aesthetics of our traditional music there can be no better setting."—R. Venugopal, Mg. Director, Spencer and Co., Chennai

"A memorable experience, participating in mikeless music at the Sittrarangam."

—Chitravina N. Ravikiran

Acknowledgements

The first edition of this monograph was undertaken in response to several persistent inquiries from within India and abroad regarding the features and ideas underlying Sittrarangam. I would like to thank all those who made Sittrarangam an experience to remember, during construction and when utilising it, even though not all can be named individually below.

The Small Theatre was the outcome of several years of research and meetings with artists and scholars across South India. The following personalities have indeed inspired and encouraged my cultural activities over a period of two decades: Dr Sivarama Karanth, Prof Haridasa Bhat, and G. Venu. They have been particularly helpful by way of providing much information and encouragement. Similarly, Prof Goverdhan Panchal's work has been my prime source of inspiration in the field of Indian theatre architecture.

Shahriar Dehghan developed the outcome of this research work on the basis of my preliminary drawings and the minimal dimensions for a fully-fledged theatre that had been identified with the help of several professional performers. He built Sittrarangam with the kind assistance from his teachers and colleagues at the Anna University, School of Architecture and Town Planning, Chennai. The thatched roof designed by him—much admired by visitors and artists alike—was built by a group of experienced rural craftsmen and could therefore last for several more years than had been anticipated by us. The Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) provided the site and financed the construction at the initiative of the Secretary of Tourism, Tiru Kirubhakaran (I.A.S.).

To V.R. Devika, then co-ordinator of cultural activities for the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), goes the credit for running Sittrarangam so skilfully that it soon gained considerable fame as a unique cultural centre even on a national level. The magic worked because she was keen on sharing the benefits of this collective effort with all lovers of Indian arts, most notably the artists described in this monograph, foreign visitors, and thousands of local children from various social backgrounds who may never have witnessed a dance, puppetry or music performance otherwise. Many of them could even participate in artistic workshops offered for free by several reputed performers at Sittrarangam.

Kalakshetra—now known as the Rukmini Devi College of Fine Arts, Kalakshetra Foundation—provided me with an appropriate artistic and natural environment, a virtual oasis amidst Chennai's traffic chaos, noise and pollution. Smt Rukmini Devi, its Founder Director, provided me with a rare opportunity to observe at close quarters how the Kalakshetra auditorium—designed by D. Appukkuttan Nair with the concept of a Kuttambalam in mind—grew from a scale model to its present grand dimensions. This transformation—a process which involved major modifications in terms of construction materials and greatly increased dimensions for the auditorium—revealed the possibilities as well as the limitations to reckon with if the structural features evolved in one type of climatic and cultural environment are transplanted to another (e.g. from Kerala's gentle monsoon climate to cyclone-prone Chennai).

The Max Mueller Bhavans of Chennai and Delhi, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (New Delhi), and the Indo-German Society Manipal provided me with several occasions to develop a fruitful rapport with artists from all over India. Similarly, the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany at New Delhi provided support and encouragement to this project. The German

Consulate General at Chennai came forward with a subsidy that helped to bring out the first edition of this monograph.

Joseph E. Ross (Founder-President of the International Lalita Kalas Foundation, U.S.A.), and Nell C. Taylor, his fellow board member, were the first to see the scope for not only dreaming about appropriate performance spaces but translating them into something tangible for the benefit of all. But for their encouragement, support and feedback I would not have had the courage to pursue this project in India.

Himanshu Burte and his wife Malini Krishnankutty, architects living in Mumbai, have spared no effort to see this monograph published again. I have therefore revised it thoroughly in order to make it a source of inspiration for students of architecture, artists and their patrons alike. I am grateful to Himanshu Burte for writing a foreword from a professional and scholarly angle.

Special thanks are due to Paul Beumer (Digiscene Amsterdam) who created the 3D model graphic renditions and the generic plan underlying Sittrarangam for this monograph. As he has guided students of the University of Amsterdam in the field of visual online teaching and research tool techniques which he used in conjunction with the European Theatron project, his experience with “interactive real time walkthroughs of highly accurate 3D models of present and past theatres” (www.theatron.org) also provides a valuable resource for others. The chief objective of this publication, namely to encourage theatre designers to translate the ‘Sittrarangam experience’ into innovative solutions of their own, can be best achieved with lucid visualisations as these. This will also be helpful to initiators of localized projects by way of getting their small theatre under way sooner.

I would also like to thank Mieke Beumer, not only for her constructive criticism, but also for endowing this monograph with a pleasant appearance that conveys the underlying motto small is beautiful.

About the author

Ludwig Pesch (b. 1955) was awarded the Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany ('Verdienstkreuz am Bande des Verdienstordens der Bundesrepublik Deutschland') for his outstanding contribution to Indo-German cultural relation.

After his music studies in Germany, he obtained his diploma and post-diploma in Carnatic music at the Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts in Chennai. A student of H. Ramachandra Shastry (1906-92), he specialized in playing the bamboo flute and participated in many of his teacher's performances.

His educational and cultural projects have been supported by Max Mueller Bhavan Chennai (the German cultural institute, elsewhere known as 'Goethe-Institute'), the Government of Tamil Nadu, the Indian National Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), the Ford Foundation, and several other institutions.

He laid the foundations for Sampradaya, a centre in Chennai which is dedicated to the documentation and promotion of the music traditions of South India. For over twenty years, the archives of Sampradaya have served musicians and scholars from all over the country and abroad.

His major work, *The Illustrated Companion to South Indian Classical Music*, has been reprinted several times (Oxford University Press, 1999); it was hailed as the "most inclusive, thorough and scientifically accurate companion to our classical music" (*The Hindu Literary Review*), "more than a reference book" (*Frontline*), "the best of all the many general surveys of the music of southern India" (www.britannica.com), and "a delight" (*Sruti Magazine*).

Since the 1990's he has performed and lectured extensively in India, South Asia, Europe, and the USA. The KIT Tropenmuseum (Royal Tropical Museum) and KIT Tropentheater in Amsterdam are among the cultural and educational institutions in Europe that have used his services as contributor and advisor.

His publications, lectures, concerts, courses and projects seek to foster an interdisciplinary approach to the arts and education on any level. He has developed and conducted e-learning course programmes on South Indian music and culture for the European Study Center (Lueneburg University) since 2001. These courses are open to teachers, students and musicians all over the world and also available in conjunction with other educational institutions.

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